

Issue Brief: Media Advocacy Evaluation Findings

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Media advocacy is a popular means of crafting and disseminating messages more broadly and has been used to increase policymaker and public awareness of key health policy issues, such as the large number of uninsured. The clinic consortia funded by The California Endowment increased their ability to raise awareness and frame the debate about the needs of clinics and clinic patients. Using different media advocacy venues, including newspaper, TV, radio, video, brochures, newsletters, and web sites, grantees have made progress in increasing policymaker and public awareness. For example, many policymakers and community leaders interviewed recalled consortia media activities and used this information to educate others. Media representatives and consultants also indicated public awareness had increased as a result of long-term, consistent efforts on the part of consortia.

Media advocacy is not an easy undertaking, requiring significant internal capacity and expertise, ongoing organizational commitment, and the ability to strategically bundle different strategies to create a compelling message. Media representatives and consultants interviewed for the evaluation emphasized developing strong relationships with the media, being proactive in providing the media with “newsworthy” information, presenting consistent and concise messages, providing personal stories, and framing the message in a broader context as successful methods for getting media coverage. Clinic consortia have taken this advice to heart. They have developed their own media advocacy approaches and positioned themselves as credible voices, increasing awareness of issues important to the health of their communities.

INTRODUCTION

As part of its commitment to increasing access to high quality and affordable health care for underserved Californians, The California Endowment (The Endowment) provided multi-year funding for the Clinic Consortia Policy and Advocacy Program. In early 2001, fifteen California regional community clinic associations and four statewide clinic organizations (“consortia” or “grantees”) received three years of funding (totaling \$10 million) to strengthen the role and capacity of consortia in order to support the management, leadership development, policy, and systems integration needs of community clinics. Funding supported specific activities related to policy advocacy, technical assistance, media advocacy, and shared services in order to increase the collective influence of clinics. In 2004, eighteen grantees were refunded for three years to undertake or continue a similar set of activities.

The purpose of this Issue Brief is to review the changes in grantee capacity to undertake media advocacy and assess the effectiveness of media advocacy in increasing public and policymaker awareness of clinic policy issues.

BACKGROUND

Media advocacy, the “strategic use of the mass media as a resource to advance a social or public policy initiative” plays a significant role in shaping both public opinion and the policy agenda.¹ Public opinion often reflects what is on television or on the radio (and by extension, what our families, friends and colleagues are discussing).² The way in which issues are presented or framed also can influence the opinions people hold. Likewise, policymakers use news stories as a proxy for public opinion. The issues presented through the media often become the policymaking agenda, and the extent to which an issue is covered in the news signifies

Grantees:

Community
Clinic
Consortia

A Program of:

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the priority of the issue.³ While it is sometimes difficult to evaluate the effects of media advocacy, there are numerous evaluations that indicate media advocacy can and does impact public policy.⁴ As such, media advocacy is an important tool for organizations wanting to draw attention to critical issues facing their constituents.

Advocacy organizations must have the necessary media advocacy understanding and resources to penetrate the media and subsequently increase public and policymaker awareness of key policy issues. As detailed in **Figure 1**, there is a host of factors that affect the success of a media advocacy campaign.⁵ The UCSF evaluation focused on many of these factors, in particular expanding staff expertise, developing relationships with the media, and understanding the contextual factors that contribute to successful media advocacy.

METHODOLOGY

UCSF administered a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments to the 19 grantees to assess grantee media advocacy capacity and outcomes from 2002–2004. Longitudinal data were collected from grantees and interviews were conducted with the targets of grant-funded activities (policymakers and community leaders) to describe the perceived effectiveness of grantee media advocacy activities and to identify key lessons learned. Media representatives and consultants were interviewed to assess the effectiveness of their relationships with clinic consortia and clinics, as well as the effectiveness of consortia strategies to increase media coverage and impact policy. UCSF asked media representatives and media consultants to reflect on what contributed to successful media advocacy.

FINDINGS

The Clinic Consortia Policy and Advocacy Program has proven to be an important means for strengthening consortia capacity to better craft and disseminate key messages about the role of the consortia, clinics, and the populations they serve. Many grantees are successfully developing articles, launching media campaigns, and working with newspaper, radio, and television. Experienced grantees are developing sophisticated strategies to educate the public on key health care issues such as, the uninsured and the role of the safety net. Other grantees still are developing their internal capacity to engage in media advocacy by creating media plans and strengthening their relationships with the media. The following is a description of the media advocacy evaluation findings.

Expanding Grantee Capacity: Building the Base

- *Consortia have established coordinated and systematic media approaches.* The use of outside media consultants and the integration of multiple media approaches (implementing media campaigns, proposing story ideas to the press,

Figure 1: Factors That Contribute to Successful Media Advocacy

- **Planning:** Successful campaigns result from early planning and research to develop messages and strategy.
- **Staff Training:** Effective campaigns often include staff training programs, i.e., training staff to be media spokespeople and training staff to plan and carry out their own media campaigns.
- **Power and Visibility:** The target audience should include policymakers who have the power to directly influence policy and individuals or organizations that are highly visible.
- **Quantity:** One message may not be effective by itself and multiple exposures in a wide array of media venues may be necessary for reader recall.
- **Personal Stories:** Stories that tug at heartstrings and are matched with their audience's experience not only tend to gain media attention, but have a greater chance of mobilizing a response.
- **Leadership:** The spokesperson or messenger is important to the public's acceptance of the message. They should be strategic thinkers that are comfortable in a political environment and should be able to facilitate advocacy efforts via relationships and personality.
- **Relationships:** Successful media advocacy efforts involve building and maintaining relationships with individuals who have the power to promote system change (such as media, policymakers, community leaders, and the public).
- **Relationships with Media Representatives:** A proactive approach, such as producing materials that journalists can use is key. Having an infrastructure of media materials allows organizers to give interviews on a moment's notice and increases the possibility that stories will be framed according to the organizer's objectives.
- **Using Data:** Using data can substantiate the legitimacy of a story frame. It can be used to indicate the size of a problem and justify social action.
- **Considering the Context:** The success of advocacy efforts depends upon characteristics of the environment in which it is organized. A successful media advocacy campaign maintains adequate control over staff and activities while also allowing for flexibility so that efforts can be fine-tuned to environments.
- **Framing the Issue:** The way in which issues are presented – the story frame – can influence the opinions people hold and, subsequently, the policymaking process itself. Media advocacy is often about competing story frames.

providing sufficient background material, etc.) have contributed to sustained media coverage.

- *Consortia have strengthened their relationships with media, as evidenced by calls from reporters for information, media attendance at consortia events, and media coverage in print, radio, and television.* Providing reporters with frequent press kits on relevant policy issues and facilitating access to clinic staff and/or patients for interviews is critical to cultivating mutually beneficial relationships.
- *Consortia have obtained coverage in a variety of news venues, including both major and local newspapers, television, and radio.* In addition, grantees are getting front-page coverage, enhancing the visibility of their issues. Coverage in major newspapers puts clinics and clinic patient issues on the state policy agenda. Articles and editorials that appeared in large newspapers also had on-line access.
- *Consortia have secured newspaper coverage on a broad range of issues that affect clinics and their patient populations, such as providing insurance coverage for the uninsured, the California state budget crisis, and increased public support for community clinics.*

Policymaker and Public Awareness of Clinic Policy Issues

- *Policymaker awareness of clinic policy issues is moderately high.* Nearly half of all policymakers and community leaders interviewed recalled consortia media activities (such as a single specific article) and reported that they used the information to educate others. They explained that personal stories, as well as media messages that highlighted the breadth and availability of services, were the most compelling messages for the public.
- *Public awareness of clinic policy issues has increased.* Approximately 40 percent of interviewed media representatives said that public understanding had increased either as the result of long-term, consistent efforts on the part of consortia or as a result of increased media coverage over time.

Media Advocacy Effectiveness: Achieving Desired Outcomes

- *The perceived effectiveness of media advocacy in achieving a policy change and/or increasing funding to clinics was mixed.*
 - *Media advocacy was perceived by grantees as less effective in achieving a policy change and/or increasing funding to clinics compared to other policy advocacy activities.* This was due to a number of factors, such as the difficulty in assessing the impact, a difficult media market, and existing clinic relationships with the media that may preclude the need for a strong relationship with the media or aggressive media strategy.

- *The media representatives and consultants were mixed in their reviews.* Some thought media advocacy activities were successful and others were unsure of the effectiveness. On the other hand, nearly all of the policymakers and community leaders reported that media advocacy was “very” or “somewhat” effective at increasing their awareness of community clinic issues.
- *The effectiveness of media advocacy hinges on several external factors that are beyond the control of grantees.* Media markets vary across the state, with rural areas having different challenges than urban areas. Additionally, a media advocacy push may not be the desired strategy when visibility is not needed or when visibility has the potential to put clinics at risk.

What Works: Strategies For Success

- *Media representatives and consultants cited five key strategies for enhancing relationships with the media:* (1) responding immediately (i.e., within hours) to media requests; (2) providing a spokesperson who is an expert in the field and comfortable in interviews; (3) maintaining long-term relationships so that media know how to use consortia as resources and trust that consortia are legitimate sources of information; (4) offering access to clinic clients and staff for news interviews; and (5) being proactive and providing the media with regular messages that have consistent themes.
- *Media representatives and consultants stressed that messages should be timely, properly crafted, concise, and inclusive of contact information.* Providing data or press releases were rated less effective by media representatives and consultants because these strategies depend on how they are used. Data is useful if connections are made between statistics and current policy issues. The media tends to be inundated with press releases. Therefore, to be effective, these should be used sparingly and distributed only when there is critical news, such as when a community clinic is in jeopardy of closing.
- *Media representatives and consultants also emphasized that in order to influence policy, it is important to use print media (particularly front-page articles), publish multiple articles, and try to have articles published in major daily newspapers.*

In sum, Grantees used varying media approaches and succeeded in obtaining coverage on an increasingly broad range of issues. But it was not an easy undertaking, requiring resources, expertise, relationships, and an open media market. While increased coverage in multiple media venues is a desired outcome, developing ongoing relationships with one or two media representatives is an important interim achievement for many grantees. These relationships are mutually beneficial, as they allow consortia to bring their

perspective to the public limelight and they provide the media with credible information on relevant health issues for a population that is often overlooked. The varying perceptions of the effectiveness of media advocacy activities in influencing policy change and public awareness suggest that media advocacy may not always achieve the desired outcome and/or these outcomes are difficult to assess. Lastly, grantee media advocacy activities are contributing to increased policymaker awareness of key clinic issues as evidenced by policymaker ability to recall consortia media activities and willingness to use this information to educate others. Public awareness of these issues also is increasing, but the extent of the increase is difficult to determine.

CONCLUSION

Media advocacy has served consortia well, establishing them as an ongoing and reliable source of information about consortia, clinics, and their patient populations. Consortia are successful in getting newsprint coverage in the larger California newspapers. The topics being covered, such as coverage expansions for children, have the potential to create new advocacy allies. Continued involvement in media advocacy creates the infrastructure for consortia to undertake a major media campaign in the future and develop themselves as a key voice in future health policy debates, such as access to health services for the uninsured or improved quality of care for underserved populations.

The implications for organizations undertaking media advocacy are three-fold. First, while there is no one-size-fits-all approach to conducting media advocacy, there are some key approaches that are likely to result in increased media coverage, such as developing relationships with the media. Second, the outcomes of grantee media advocacy activities are likely to vary due in part to location and whether a media market is easy to penetrate and to the saliency of clinic policy issues or whether there is high public and policymaker awareness of clinic policy issues. Lastly, in all likelihood, media advocacy is an effective tool to educate policymakers and the public, but it is not the only source of information or necessarily the most effective approach for all situations. As illustrated by grantees, a multi-faceted advocacy approach that targets different media venues and includes other types of policy advocacy, such as hosting policy forums, is more likely to have the largest impact at increasing awareness of clinic policy issues and the needs of their target populations.

Endnotes:

- 1 Pertschuk, M., et al., *Media Strategies for Smoking Control*. Rockville, MD: National Cancer Institute, pg. 8. 1989
- 2 Lippmann, W. *Public opinion* (Free Press pbks. ed.). New York: Free Press Paperbacks. 1997
- 3 McCombs, M. "Building Consensus: The News Media's Agenda-Setting Roles." *Political Communication*, 14(4), 433-443. 1997

- 4 Holder, H.D., and Treno, A.J., "Media advocacy in community prevention: news as means to advance policy change." *Addiction*, 92(s2), S189-S199. 1997
- 5 **Figure 1** sources: Randolph, W. and Viswanath, K. "Lessons learned from public health mass media campaigns: marketing health in a crowded media world." *Annual Review of Public Health*. 25(1) 419-437. 2004. Bales, S.N. and Gilliam, F.D., Jr. *Communications for Social Good*. The Foundation Center. April 2004. Wallack, L., Dorfman, L., Jernigan, D., Themba, M. and Siegal, M. "Media advocacy and public health power for prevention." *International Quarterly of Community Health Education*. 16(3), 3. 1996

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