Are We Ready to Address Policy?: Assessing and Building Readiness for Policy Work
Submitted by Nancy Dubois, Health Promotion Consultant

The development of healthy public policy is seen by many as a far-reaching strategy. It has the potential to create environments or conditions that contribute to individuals and communities more easily adopting health promoting behaviours. A healthy public policy can be informal and local, such as a community recreation centre policy that provides financial assistance for participation in activities or sports; or it could be a broader municipal or regional policy influencing how new communities are developed and connected to encourage and enable active transportation. Many policies adopted at a provincial level (such as Ontario’s Smoke-Free Ontario Act) were first created and implemented at the local level.

Advocating for policy development or change is an activity carried out by many local community groups, partnerships or coalitions in collaboration with a broad range of public, not-for-profit and private partners. It is often a long, complex process that depends on a variety of factors to be successful. One such factor is the level of readiness of the community group, local decision-makers and the community affected to take action on the issue.

The focus of this issue of *in depth* is assessing readiness for policy work and developing strategies to increase readiness. It provides a series of steps, assessment questions, strategies and examples to assist a group in making the decision of whether or not to move forward on a policy effort.
Before You Begin

Assessing readiness for policy is step two in the Roadmap for Policy Development developed by The Health Communication Unit (THCU), now housed at Public Health Ontario. According to THCU’s eight-step policy roadmap, a group is ready to assess its readiness for policy development once there is a clear understanding of the issue being addressed. This is typically done through gathering and analyzing many forms of information as outlined in step one of the THCU framework.

The group should also put some effort into exploring possible options to address the problem and have a sense of what might be successful within their particular community. A summary report of key findings (i.e., community picture, briefing paper or position statement) that presents the issue can be extremely helpful in educating community members and decision-makers about the matter and articulating the rationale for considering policy development as a strategy.

Defining Readiness

A community’s readiness for change is the degree to which it is prepared to take action on an issue. Actions undertaken at the local level prove more effective when they are aligned with that community’s readiness for change. Defining the stage of readiness is important because:

“Policy development initiatives require appropriate timing and dedicated resources over a long period of time. Failure can result when there are inadequate resources, or when the public is against the development of a new policy. If your community, organization or potential partners are not ready for a new policy, you may need to use another approach to improve the situation.” (OCDPA, 2011)

“Matching an intervention to a community’s level of readiness is absolutely essential to increase the potential for success. Certainly, interventions must be challenging enough to move a community forward in its level of readiness. However, efforts that are too ambitious are likely to fail because community members will not be ready or able to respond.” (Plested et al., 2009)

The Community Readiness Model, developed at the Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at Colorado State University, outlines nine stages of community readiness ranging from “no awareness” of the problem to “professionalization” in the response to the problem within the community (Edwards et al., 2000).
1. **NO AWARENESS**: The community or the leaders do not generally recognize the issue as a problem. “It’s just the way things are.” Community climate may unknowingly encourage the behaviour.

2. **DENIAL**: While there is usually some recognition that the issue itself is a problem, there is little or no recognition that the problem might occurring locally. Community climate tends to be passive or guarded.

3. **VAGUE AWARENESS**: There is a general feeling among some in the community that there is a local problem and that something ought to be done about it, but there is no immediate motivation to do anything. Community climate does not serve to motivate leaders.

4. **PREPLANNING**: There is clear recognition by at least some that there is a local problem and that something should be done about it. There are identifiable leaders and there may even be a committee, but efforts are not focused or detailed. Community climate is beginning to acknowledge the necessity of dealing with the problem.

5. **PREPARATION**: Planning is going on and focuses on practical details. Leadership is active and energetic and resources are being actively sought or have been committed. Community climate offers at least modest support of efforts.

6. **INITIATION**: Enough information is available to justify efforts. Action is underway, but it is still viewed as a new effort. Community climate can vary, but there is usually no active resistance and there is often a modest involvement of community members in the efforts.

7. **STABILIZATION**: One or two activities are running, supported by administrators or community decision-makers. Programs, activities or policies are viewed as stable. There is little perceived need for change or expansion. Community climate generally supports what is occurring.

8. **CONFIRMATION / EXPANSION**: Original efforts have been evaluated and modified and new efforts are being planned or tried in order to reach more [or different] people. Due to increased knowledge and desire for improved programs, community climate may challenge specific efforts, but is fundamentally supportive.

9. **PROFESSIONALIZATION**: The community has detailed and sophisticated knowledge of the problem. Highly trained staff are running programs or activities, leaders are supportive and community involvement is high. Effective evaluation is used to test and modify activities. Community climate is fundamentally supportive but should continue to hold programs accountable.

The Community Readiness Model not only serves to define the various stages of readiness; it also offers a method for assessing readiness, based on the examination of six different dimensions. In addition, strategies to increase readiness have been developed for each stage and some of these will be presented later in this article. See the recommended resources listed here for details.

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:**

- [Community Readiness Model](#), from the Tri-Ethnic Center at Colorado State University
- [Community Readiness Manual](#), from the Colorado State University
- [Community Readiness](#), from the Southwest Center for Applied Prevention Technologies
Readiness in Whom?

Four segments or populations should be considered in assessing a community’s level of readiness to mobilize to address a specific issue. These are presented in two categories: organizational readiness and community readiness.

**ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS**

- **Individual organizations** within the community group are ready to join the effort.
- The collective group (coalition, partnership, alliance, etc.) is ready to move forward with a policy effort.

**COMMUNITY READINESS**

- **Community members and groups** to be affected by the policy (for example, a school, a workplace, citizens of a municipality) are largely in favour of the effort.
- Some key and influential decision-makers on the policy being considered are supportive.

TIPS:

- Regardless of which of the four populations is being considered, capture any and all information provided regarding why an individual or organization might be opposed to the policy change efforts. These will help in crafting counter-arguments later on.
- In considering each of the four population segments, keep in mind the need to identify, “Who would care?”; “Who would be affected”; “In what way?”

Approaches in assessing and building readiness of each of these four segments will now be outlined in the order that it is recommended they be addressed.

**The Readiness of Individual Organizations**

The readiness of your community group to undertake policy efforts is contingent on the ability and willingness of individual member organizations to participate in these activities. Before moving forward, it is crucial to be clear who is on board to actively support the policy work, at least at this stage. Membership might change over time but clarity at this point is key. In addition, all members of the group should be clear on how the group’s decisions will be made and by whom.
Assessing Readiness

Each organization considering a role in policy work might consider the questions below with respect to the commitment of their own organization. Discussion with senior management will likely be necessary.

- Are the policy and policy development process a fit with the mandate of your organization?
- How much time and resources do you or your organization have to support the policy development process over an extended period of time?
- Which individuals or groups can and will offer human or financial resource support to assist with the policy development process?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:</th>
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<td>Organizational Readiness Assessment Tool on page 38 of <em>Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers</em></td>
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**DECISION TIME: ASK YOURSELF...**

Do you have the support and active participation of the key individuals or organizations that are necessary to have on board?

- If yes, proceed.
- If no, can they be recruited to come on-side?
  - If no, abandon the policy effort.
  - If yes, what strategies will you use to bring them on side?

**TIPS:**

- Find a way to link the desired policy outcome to the mandate of each organization.
- Go beyond the organizational representative for your group in favour of a response from senior management or the board on behalf of the whole organization.
- Pitch the project to these people in a customized way; one organization might need a personalized approach with a presentation, while others might be fine with an email request.
- Get written agreement to participate from each organization.
- As the initiative evolves and takes shape, an organization might change their decision regarding involvement so a process for this contingency is recommended.

Building Readiness

Presented here are a few recommended strategies and additional resources to help build readiness of a group's individual members:

- Have an organization that is already on board, personally speak to those that are hesitant, ensuring similar levels of staff connect (e.g., CEO to CEO). Select the influencing organization based on their credibility and stature with the “receiving” organization.
- Prepare a document that makes the case for work in this area, using local data to the degree possible, and tailoring it to the mandate and values of the hesitant organization.
- Provide any individuals that are supportive with multiple copies of educational materials (e.g., pamphlet) to distribute within their networks.
The Readiness of the Community

Once readiness of the group’s member organizations is achieved, it is necessary to determine the level of community understanding and support for addressing the issue through policy. If the community affected by the proposed policy change is not supportive of work in the area, the effort cannot be successful.

AN EXAMPLE TO ILLUSTRATE THE CONCEPT:
A coalition was in place to address tobacco control issues in their community, including the teen smoking rate, which was disproportionately high as compared to other places in Ontario. They had identified that a contributing factor was that kids were often able to purchase cigarettes from many vendors despite the laws. One strategy they considered was to undertake a “sting” whereby underage youth were directed to try to purchase tobacco products from a variety of vendors. Subsequent to identifying which stores were not complying with required law, the vendors were provided with educational materials from the public health enforcement officer and closely monitored for further infractions.

THE READINESS ASPECT:
In deciding whether to undertake the sting operation, each organizational member of the coalition needed to determine whether they could support the initiative. One particular member, the local police department, had to opt out because of the possibility of entrapment. The group decided to proceed without this member but understood that following this activity, the police would re-join efforts.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:
“Social proof” is an influence and persuasion tactic commonly used in the marketing industry and briefly explained here.

Online Business Case Creator Workbook from The Health Communication Unit

Assessing Readiness

Those considering policy action should gather what already exists in terms of public opinion on the topic of interest and review how the community affected has reacted to this or similar issues in the past. Primary data-gathering may be required should existing evidence be questionable or out of date. This could take the form of a survey, observational data or qualitative input. Generating local data can be time-consuming when done properly and with enough scientific rigor to be taken seriously, but will likely be invaluable when used to convince decision-makers later on. Consider the following:

- What is public opinion on the issue and/or policy?
- If the policy you are seeking was put into place today, who would care? Who would be affected? In what way?
- What reasons to oppose this policy will be put forward by those affected? Are they contestable? How can you refute these arguments?
- Are there educational and awareness programs in your community that focus on your problem? How long have they been running? How successful have they been? How popular are they?
- Has the issue been a recent focus in the media?
TIPS:

• If doing a formal survey, invest in the expertise and methodology to ensure that your data is sound and results will stand up to any scrutiny. This would include such things as an adequate sample size to be representative of the population, and the use of reliable and valid questions.

• Beware of “drowning in data”. Keep your data gathering and analysis focused.

DECISION TIME: ASK YOURSELF...

Is a large percentage of the community supportive of the policy effort?

• If yes, proceed.

• If no, what strategies will you use to bring them on side?

AN EXAMPLE TO ILLUSTRATE THE CONCEPT:

Before the Ontario Pesticide Ban was put in place, many municipalities were enacting their own by-laws on this topic. In two Ontario municipalities, a proposed pesticide by-law was put before municipal/regional council and, based on the evidence, it was passed. However, this had been done with very little, if any, consultation with the community. Several sectors were upset by the by-law, including the landscape/gardening industry, golf courses and the public (related to their own lawn care practices). Based on the uproar generated, the by-law was rescinded and a public education campaign and community consultation process was undertaken. About a year later, the by-law came forward again and passed without the same concerns.

THE READINESS ASPECT:

The timing was not right for the first proposed by-law as more public education and consultation was necessary.

Building Readiness

Consider the following activities to reach out to the community, increase awareness and understanding of the issue, and mobilize support for the issue:

• An awareness or education campaign to increase the community’s understanding of the need for action.

• A media advocacy campaign to influence opinions about the issue and the need for policy action.

• A social media strategy to connect with the public and rally community support for the issue.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

Interactive Campaign Planner from The Health Communication Unit

Media Advocacy Workbook from The Health Communication Unit

Media Advocacy workshops from the Program Training and Consultation Centre (past webinar slides available here)

Media Advocacy Manual from the American Public Health Association

The Alberta Policy Coalition for Cancer Prevention’s Social Media: Quick Tips for Policy Advocacy
The Readiness of Decision-Makers
It is also critical to know the opinion and level of understanding that influential leaders have on the issue. Although a more detailed examination of the decision-makers will be necessary later on in the process, now is a good time to identify anyone particularly supportive of your efforts.

Assessing Readiness
A group considering policy work would want to know that one or more potential decision-makers were at least aware of the issue, and ideally, supportive of change. This might be determined through a review of previous meeting minutes to see how decision-makers have previously voted on similar issues. Consider the following questions before moving on:

- How have decision-makers made decisions in the past on issues connected or similar to yours?
- Which community leaders, elected officials, citizens or groups will be supportive or unsupportive of this policy change initiative? What is their position? How can you influence them?

AN EXAMPLE TO ILLUSTRATE THE CONCEPT:
A community coalition was interested in a policy to address the number and location of tanning salons in close proximity to secondary schools. They used a network analysis approach to identify who they might access to find out what the city councilors knew about this issue and how they felt about it. As a result, the coalition was able to identify five individuals who collectively knew about 75% of the council members and were willing to share their thoughts about the situation with the group.

THE READINESS ASPECT:
As a result of the reconnaissance, the coalition decided to wait on approaching the municipal council with a by-law on tanning salons. Instead, they elected to undertake an education campaign, geared to the public and the councilors, about the dangers of indoor tanning, especially for youth. Since then, there has also been media coverage about this issue, provincially and nationally, that will influence a policy decision.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:
The Policy Readiness Tool - Understanding a Municipality’s Readiness for Policy Change and Strategies for Taking Action created by School of Public Health, University of Alberta has a detailed questionnaire to assess the policy adoption “style” of a governing body (such as a municipality). Detailed strategies are then recommended, according to whether your municipality is to be considered an “Innovator”, “Majority” or “Late Adopter”.

DECISION TIME: ASK YOURSELF...
Do you have the support of at least one influential decision-maker who will assist your efforts by acting as a champion? If there is only a single decision-maker, is that person at least not publicly against your approach?

- If yes, proceed.
- If no, what strategies will you use to bring them on side?
Building Readiness
To engage involvement and increase buy-in of key decision-makers, consider the following approaches:

- Request an individual meeting or informal visit with each decision-maker to get an idea of where they stand on your issue. Make sure you send the best mix of messengers to the meeting.
- Identify and engage the support of ‘influencers’ or champions - those who know and are respected by the decision-makers - and who can find out where they stand on the issue. Be sure you are not asking the influencer to compromise their relationship or ethics.

**TIP:**
- This is NOT the time to take an official poll or vote – that will come later. At this stage, you are looking to understand if there are any champions for your cause, who your major opponents might be, and who could be influenced to come on board.

The Readiness of the Collective Group
The final step in assessing readiness for policy work is to determine whether your partnership (or coalition, alliance, etc.) is collectively ready to move forward with a policy effort.

Assessing Readiness
Assessing group readiness will likely require a dedicated meeting of a few hours in length where members bring forward the results of their individual readiness assessment. As mentioned earlier, some preliminary work is necessary to ensure there are clear decision-making procedures in place, especially if this is a new group or there are several new members. Consider the following in determining whether there is collective capacity to undertake this policy work:

- Does the group have the skills to tackle the policy development process?
- Does the group have the resources (mostly time) to devote to a policy process that may take several months or years?
- Which individuals or organizations can and will offer human or financial support to assist the policy development process?

**DECISION TIME: ASK YOURSELF…**
Is the group collectively ready to address the policy effort?

- Are there enough members on board to provide the critical mass to move on?
  - If yes, proceed.
  - If no, can additional members be recruited?

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:**
- **Influencing Decision-Makers** (Heart Health Resource Centre, 2007)
- Tools and resources on social network analysis or Network Mapping (HC Link, 2011)
- **Identifying Opinion Leaders/Champions**, School of Public Health at University of Alberta (originally outlined by Valente and Pumpuang, 2007)
Building Readiness

The process of policy change may be quite a different kind of work for individuals and groups. The group itself may be new to one another, in whole or in part. Policy change is rarely successfully undertaken by a single organization so it is critical that a skilled and ready collective is in place.

Strategies for enhancing the readiness of your group to undertake this work include:

- Professional development opportunities to improve skills and efficacy in undertaking policy change.
- Additional health promotion initiatives to address the issue and build the foundation for future policy efforts.

AN EXAMPLE TO ILLUSTRATE THE CONCEPT:

A community partnership was working collaboratively to address chronic disease prevention through community awareness activities, programs and services. After several years, it was determined that many segments of the population, particularly those who live in poverty, were not being reached through these means. As a result, they decided to explore changing some of the local policies that related to where grocery stores are located in relation to lower income populations and the costs of participating in recreation programs. Before setting to work on these new areas they:

1. Invited new organizations to the table that understand those who live in low income situations, such as the District Social Planning Council, the Immigrant Settlement Agency, the United Way and an interfaith group.

2. Brought in a consultant to provide a learning session to help their group understand more about the policy development process as well as a facilitate development of a plan.

THE READINESS ASPECT:

The addition of new members needed to be done in advance of the training so all were exposed to the same information. In addition, before decisions about whether to proceed with policy work could be made, the expanded group needed to revisit their Terms of Reference and look specifically at their decision-making process to ensure all organizations were aware of and agreed with the process. In this case, it was preferred that consensus be reached but in the event that was not possible, a vote would be taken to identify who would be prepared to participate in the policy efforts. Knowing then who was “in”, this smaller group could determine whether they had the right mix of partners to move forward.

- Do the participating members have the necessary skills and capacity to collectively take on the policy effort?
  » If yes, proceed.
  » If no, can the appropriate resources be rallied to build the necessary capacity? Are members interested in building the identified capacities?

- Knowing that policy is only one part of a comprehensive solution to any public health issue, are there educational and awareness programs in your community that focus on your problem?
  » If yes, proceed.
  » If no, can these be established?
Conclusion
Assessing readiness for policy development or change is one of the first steps a community partnership or coalition focused on this type of work will need to take. The decision will be multi-faceted in that the group will want to assess the readiness of each individual organization to proceed, the community that will be affected by the policy, at least some of the decision-makers, and finally, the group itself. The overall goal is for the collective group to make the “go / no-go” decision with respect to a policy effort at this time. If the decision is “no-go”, the group will face the decision of what to do next. Options could include:

- Abandoning the policy work altogether at this time.
- Postponing efforts until the timing is better.
- Strategizing how to improve the readiness in the area that is lacking and revisit the decision to proceed when readiness has improved.

If the decision is made to move ahead with the policy change process, the group would likely proceed to the next step outlined in the Policy Roadmap - setting goals, objectives and specific policy options.

It is important to note that the legacy of the information gathered during the readiness assessment stage can also be used in future steps of the policy development process. For instance, the data generated from assessing the readiness of the population could be a very effective component of the messages used to persuade decision-makers to support the new policy. Likewise, knowing that specific organizations have formally agreed to participate in the process could provide the opportunity to engage their volunteers and staff as influential messengers to persuade decision-makers.

AN EXAMPLE TO ILLUSTRATE THE OVERALL CONCEPT:
A public health unit with jurisdiction over both a city and county was considering rallying community partners to advocate for smoke-free outdoor recreation spaces. The Board of Health was supportive of this initiative as it was consistent with previous actions taken in tobacco control. The local chapters of the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Canadian Cancer Society and The Lung Association were on board to play an active role.

Through a force field analysis, it was determined that organizations likely to oppose the policy were minor sports leagues, particularly those with adult participants, and the Tourism/Economic Development departments of the County. The latter was concerned that this type of policy would interfere with sports tournaments coming to the area. The policy was not identified as an issue in the City; from previously collected data, city planners knew that parents were supportive of smoke-free spaces for their children.

An important aspect of the local context is that in the County, the primary industry is agriculture and the crop most commonly grown is tobacco, although it has been decreasing in recent years.

THE READINESS ASPECT:
As a result of assessing all four elements of readiness, it was determined that efforts would initially be best directed at the City. With success there and the tracking of any impact on the local economy, they would consider approaching the County in the future.
Southwest Center for Applied Prevention Technologies offers a handout summarizing information, strategies and tools related to community readiness.


Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at Colorado State University website has community readiness information, presentation and publications.

References


Additional Resources
HC Link's collection of policy development resources.


- Policy Readiness Tool - Understanding a Municipality's Readiness for Policy Change and Strategies for Taking Action
- General Strategies for Encouraging Policy Change
- A number of Useful Resources regarding policy advocacy, identifying opinion leaders, use of social media.

Physical Activity Resource Centre's (PARC) Workbook for Influencing Physical Activity Policy available for download or order.


HC Link works with community groups, organizations, and partnerships to build healthy, vibrant communities across Ontario. We offer consultations, learning and networking events, and resources in both English and French. Our services are funded by the Government of Ontario and are provided free of charge where possible.

To learn more about HC Link or request a service, please visit www.HCLinkOntario.ca or contact us at 1-855-847-1575 or info@hclinkontario.ca