Engaging Local Policymakers

Background

This resource summarizes tips from the California Department of Public Health Statewide Coordinating Center's March 2026 webinar on how healthy eating and active living coalitions can engage local policymakers. Working with policymakers can help coalitions establish a sustainable source of funding, assign responsibility for actions, and institutionalize changes that strengthen community health outcomes.

Understanding your audience

Begin by deciding which policymakers to engage and considering how they could support your coalition's work.

Understand policymakers' roles, assets, and levers. Identify the tools, influence, and platforms policymakers can use to advance your work within the structure they operate in. This will help you determine the best way to approach them. For example, policymakers may be able to grant a county agency explicit authority to implement initiatives that improve food security. Understand there may be limitations that affect policymakers' ability to support your work through direct funding. When direct funding is not available, policymakers can still contribute by (1) drafting a policy that expands authority, adjusts rules, or improves coordination, (2) raising awareness about your coalition, or (3) championing your cause when opportunities arise.

Understand supporting arguments and different perspectives. Supporting arguments align with your coalition's mission. Partnering with organizations that champion supporting arguments and have strong relationships with policymakers can help you advance your work. Different perspectives may raise considerations that policymakers are weighing. Understanding these viewpoints can help you anticipate questions, address concerns, and refine your approach so your coalition is prepared to engage constructively.

Developing your message

Once you understand your audience, develop a clear and compelling message.

Clearly communicate the issue. Explain **why** the issue is important, **how** your coalition is addressing the issue, and **what** the policymaker can do to help.

Emphasize shared priorities. Connect your message to the policymaker's priorities and highlight your shared values. For example, if they focus on public safety and workforce development, show how healthy eating and active living contribute to safer neighborhoods and a stronger workforce.

Highlight quantitative data and stories. Data demonstrate the scope of the issue, and stories—especially from constituents—bring data to life and help policymakers connect emotionally.

Right-size your communication approach. Policymakers are busy. Short formats, such as elevator pitches or one-pagers, are often most appropriate for introducing an issue. If they request more detail, you can follow up with reports or longer presentations.

Understanding advocacy versus lobbying

Before engaging policymakers, understand the difference between advocacy and lobbying and the rules within your organization, contracts, or grants that may limit your activities. Consider seeking legal guidance if needed.

- **Advocacy** is any activity used to educate, inform, organize, and engage communities and decision-makers around policy and systems change.
- **Lobbying** is any activity intended to influence federal, state, or local officials to pass legislation or to influence the outcome of an election, a referendum, or an initiative. Many government and philanthropic funding sources restrict lobbying activities.

Key resource: Public health advocacy

See the Public Health Advocacy: The Basics webinar from the American Public Health Association and ChangeLab Solutions for guidance on engaging in advocacy when there are lobbying restrictions.

Key consideration: Lobbying and its exceptions

Under IRS rules, an activity is considered lobbying if it includes:

1. **Communication** with
2. A **government official or employee** who has a role in forming legislation, and
3. A **stated point of view** on
4. **Specific legislation**

Some activities may qualify as exceptions, including responding to requests for testimony, providing technical assistance, communicating about regulations or administrative actions, and in most cases, engaging with non-legislative bodies like planning commissions or school boards.

Approaching policymakers

Once you understand your audience, have developed your message, and are clear on the rules for advocacy and lobbying, you can begin engaging policymakers. Keep these tips in mind:

- **Establish ongoing relationships with policymakers.** Share your coalition's work before making a request. You can do this by presenting at meetings where policymakers are present, inviting policymakers to your events, or scheduling introductory meetings. (A sample script is in Figure 1). Continue sharing updates and successes (for example, through newsletters or emails) to maintain the relationship.
- **Collaborate with partners.** Coordinate with partners to develop an engagement strategy. Each organization can contribute based on its rules and funding constraints. For example, local health departments may provide data that nonprofit partners can use to advocate for specific policies.
- **Engage community members.** You serve as a link between the policymakers and constituents. Involve community members in your efforts and help amplify their voices. See the *Community Power Building* resource for additional guidance.

Key resources: Coalition spotlights

These examples highlight how coalitions have partnered with other local organizations and used data to engage policymakers:

- *Reimagining Funding for Healthy Eating and Active Living in Los Angeles County*
- *Using Data to Support Healthy Eating and Active Living Coalitions in California's Central Coast*

Figure 1. Sample script for contacting policymakers

When calling or emailing to schedule a meeting:

1. Identify yourself as a constituent
2. State the name of your organization
3. Describe the purpose of the meeting
4. Mention who else will be attending

You can use this script as a guide:

Hello, my name is ___ and I am a constituent in [Policymaker]'s district. I am part of a multisector collaborative on community health that focuses on local policy solutions.

My colleague ___ from ___ and I would like to set up a meeting with [Policymaker] to:

1. **Share recent data and recommendations** from research.
2. **Discuss a recent budget proposal** that aims to cut funding for research and programs designed to prevent childhood obesity.
3. **Discuss a potential policy initiative** that we believe is aligned with [Policymaker]'s priorities.

Would [Policymaker] be available to meet next week?

Sources

The content in this document was informed by the following resources:

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