HOW TO DO A POLICY PANEL

A policy panel supports a community's willingness and ability to enforce policies, and encourages a positive political and social climate for change while broadening involvement to community leaders and key stakeholders. Policy panels also involve the public/media in the solution by providing a place for public education and awareness. The panel can act as one component of a multifaceted strategy to help bring attention to the problem and explore possible solutions. Through their recommendations, policy panels give a community group focus and structure, as well as guidance for the necessary efforts to change policy.

What is a policy panel?

A policy panel is a time-limited process that produces a report with a set of principles and recommendations, which can be implemented through advocacy. Whether it is at the community, state, or national level, a policy panel:

1. verifies key problems;
2. reviews alternatives solutions;
3. develops a consensus of action steps to be taken by panel members;
4. works under a framework;
5. sets measurement targets.

Why should our community conduct a policy panel?

- To mobilize community members, builds social capital, and strengthens the community. The process provides a forum to discuss local issues and engages community members in the issues that impact them and the community as a whole through testifying and participating in public hearings.
- To help form alliances. The outcome can be a powerful consensus report that is strengthened by the alliances of individuals who would not normally work together. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) of NJ conducted a policy panel titled "Overcoming Addiction Discrimination." They included the director of the Drug Policy Alliance of NJ, with whom the panel conveners had some disagreement with in the past. The outcome is a newly formed alliance, without which the recommendations report would not be as powerful.
- To influence community norms**.** By acting as visible, concerned public figures, panelists can influence community members' attitudes and collective social norms. Implementation of the recommended policies may also lead to environmental change that will impact social attitudes toward harmful behaviors.
- To promote collaboration. By uniting as a co-sponsor or partner with an organization that has mutual interests, the sponsoring group can add value and authority to the entire panel process and outcome. For example, the San Diego County Policy Panel was strengthened by the powerful lobby arm of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the authority of the local sheriff department.

When is a policy panel <u>not</u> appropriate?

- When an issue is better addressed through quiet negotiations of a few parties, rather than in public. For example, the bar owners on one street in Santa Barbara agreed on the importance of server training that teaches bartenders skills to prevent underage drinking.
- When a limited actors or sectors can make changes on their own. For example, the president of Pennsylvania State University made an agreement with the State liquor board to launch an initiative on college binge drinking, focusing on underage students.
- When an issue can be addressed or a policy changed quickly and with little controversy.

Action Steps for Conducting a Policy Panel

Use the following suggested action steps as a guideline. Remember that each policy panel is conducted within a unique locale and context, each with its own underlying social and political conditions. As you read below, think about how each step could be applied in your specific situation.

Action Steps

1. Select and describe the topic
2. Research the issue and create a briefing paper
3. Recruit a Chair and panelists
4. Information Packet
5. Develop a media strategy
6. Begin panel discussions with a reception
7. Hold panel meetings
8. Hold public hearing(s)
9. Hold post hearing meetings with panel members
10. Write the panel's recommendations in a report format
11. Disseminate the report widely
12. Advocate for implementation of recommendations
13. Celebrate successes

1. Select and describe the topic

The first step of conducting a policy panel is to choose an issue, describe it, and gain a firm understanding of why it is important to address this topic. In this case, the issue is preventing underage drinking.

2. Research

The next step is to research the local issue and how it relates to the community. It is important to do this early, as it will help you select panelists and will give the community members and panelists a better understanding of the issue. As Deacon Dzierzawski said, "one of the greatest challenges in conducting a policy panel is… to give enough background so that [panelists] can understand it and ask questions, [bringing] people to a place of commonality and getting them to come together on what the recommendations look like and on specific strategies."

Remember to research laws and data regarding underage drinking. This information should eventually be organized into a briefing paper which will be distributed to the panelists.

Briefing paper. This paper should provide the panelists with background information about the issues from a scientific, political, and social perspective. You might not have the resources to find all of the necessary information. It is not uncommon for the sponsoring organization to commission experts to write some or all of the paper. For example, for one national policy panel on improving quality of treatment, Join Together asked five professionals with specific expertise to each write short papers. In another panel, Join Together worked on the paper with the American Bar Association Standing Committee on Substance Abuse, using their legal expertise. You could do the same at the local level by collaborating with local university researchers or legal groups.

The following are suggestions for briefing paper content:

- **Issue overview.** Provide a general description about the issue and why it is important to address it.
- **Data**. Provide local data that measures the problem (i.e. DWI/DUI rates, underage drinking rates, age of first drink). This gives the panelists a sense of the problem on the local level, and provides a basis for comparison after the recommendations are implemented.

- **Obstacles**. What are the specific obstacles related to underage drinking that face the community? For instance, the background for a Join Together panel on underage drinking included statistics about alcohol advertisement targeted at youth, the price of alcohol, and loopholes in laws regarding underage alcohol possession.
- **Current laws**. What are the relevant statutes and regulations? For a panel on underage drinking, regulations regarding alcohol sales, possession and consumption would be appropriate.
- **Judicial history**. What were prior attempts to resolve these issues in the community or state? What is the history of court cases on the issue? This is important because past court cases set precedents, giving insights about kinds of policies that would and would not survive legislation.
- **Success**. What are successful strategies or policies in other communities or states? What are ineffective ones? What is a professional opinion on why these strategies were or were not successful?
- **Current Efforts.** What are other local organizations doing to tackle the issue? Is there a relevant bill pending discussion in the State Legislature? The panel should be updated regarding current community efforts.

3. Recruitment

The most important task of the sponsoring organization is deciding on and recruiting panel members. The first steps to recruitment include brainstorming, holding key informant interviews, and making lists of all the types of panelists you hope for and the people who might fit these roles. It is important to remember to use all of your resources, as one panelist might help you recruit another.

Chair. The choice of a chairperson is particularly important. Choose a well-known, credible community leader who is accustomed to facilitating, negotiating, and reaching a consensus. For example, a community panel in Ohio on gun violence was chaired by the chief of surgery of a local hospital, a powerful spokesman who was also African American, representing the majority of gun violence victims. A recent Ohio state wide panel on underage drinking was co-chaired by Ohio first lady Hope Taft and Judge Steven Michael, juvenile court and domestic relationship judge in Jackson County, Ohio. Other examples include a former mayor or governor, a high profile city council member or judge, or the president of an organization who works closely with the affected communities.

Panelists. Although the panelists should be able to offer insights on the specific issue, they do not need to all be directly involved with underage drinking. Recruit members whose institution or personal involvement is needed to achieve the policy panel's goals. Your choice of panelists should represent a range of perspectives on the issue.

Choose panelists who are held at a certain level of prestige in the community and may have a significant stake in the issue of youth alcohol use. For instance, the panel may be composed of a prominent researcher in the field, a grassroots activist, a policy maker, a current or former government official, a member of the consumer group (e.g. a recovering alcoholic), and a member of an affected group, such as a liquor outlet owner or a university official. Other panelists to consider may include a police chief, student leader, parent, school superintendent, and the district attorney. A judge or journalist may also agree to participate in panel discussions, but due to ethical considerations may choose to take no position on the panel recommendations, as in the Join Together Policy Panel on Discrimination (Join Together, 2003).

It is also important to recruit new people who might not already be advocates, but are nonetheless important members of the community. In the Santa Rosa, CA policy panel, a member of the wine industry was recruited for the policy panel on youth access to alcohol because the wine industry played an important economic role of the community. The presence of this individual added authority to the recommendations, and the issue gained the support of the wine industry (Miranda, 2004).

When narrowing down your list of panelists, consider how individuals will function in the context of the goals you hope to accomplish. Some people might be better suited to testify than to act as panelists. For instance, you may feel that a liquor lobbyist would be too divisive as a panelist but would serve your cause well by giving testimony.

Although recruiting a broad range of individuals adds credibility and wide appeal to the panel's recommendations, it may also lead to compromises and results the panel conveners may not expect. Keep in mind that this is a democratic process.

Should you involve government officials on the panel?
Whether or not government officials should be panelists must be considered strategically, with the local political climate taken into account. You may want to form alliances with government officials, or you may want to remain completely independent of them if their public approval is low at the time. Include key governmental officials if their involvement is necessary to act. The Santa Rosa policy panel included a member of the city council, who issued a directive to the City Attorney to begin drafting a conditional use permit (CUP)[1] ordinance which was eventually enacted by the City Council.

How do you keep panelists involved?
The panel is a time-limited commitment. Keep your meetings focused by ensuring every meeting has a goal that is achieved. Keep panelists informed by giving them the relevant background information and briefing them as needed, but use their time efficiently and avoid overwhelming them. You might organize the agenda around strategic questions to help promote interaction and focus and immediately follow up on requests for more information from the panelists.

4. Information Packet
Once the panel is chosen, the next task is to collect and send an information packet to each panelist in advance of the panel's initial meeting. The packet should give the panelists a general idea of the problem and help them choose which issues they will address. Items to include in the information packet may include:

- A briefing paper on the topic
- First meetings agenda
- Expert recommendations and reports
- Research
- Newspaper articles. Local articles highlight the issues and bring them to life.
- Panelists' Biographies

5. Develop a Media Strategy
It is important to use the media to help publicize the panel events and draw attention to the issue. The public hearing and release of the recommendation reports are great media events, and can be accompanied with a press event with key panelists. Also, pay attention to related activity outside the coalition to time a press event. Publicizing the report is a key precursor to implementing the panelists' recommendations, as the community members need to be sympathetic to the issue in order to support the recommended changes.

[1] A CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT (CUP) allows a city or county to consider special uses which may be essential or desirable to a particular community, but which are not allowed as a matter of right within a zoning district, through a public hearing process. See http://ceres.ca.gov/planning/cup/condition.htm#what_is_anchor for a definition.

The following are tips for developing a media campaign:

- Work with individuals with communication, marketing, or media skills
- Schedule meetings with newspaper editorial boards and local broadcasters and brief them on the issue and the importance of the hearing to your community
- Send flyers or press releases to target communities (i.e. for an underage drinking hearing, target college campuses and schools)
- Post information on community websites
- Invite a journalist to be a part of the policy panel.
- Develop the press strategy around finite dates and deadlines regarding the hearing, deliberations, and report publication. This is important because it tells the public that the hearing event will lead to something concrete and positive, and tells the media there is immediate news.
- Communicate with the press and be strategic in building a relationship with them by:
    - Establishing your credibility with the local news media as a source for information on substance abuse issues
    - Meeting regularly with newspaper publishers and editors, and with television and radio station managers
    - Clarifying you media message and communicating key points
    - Reviewing the station's coverage of substance abuse in preparation for the first meeting
    - Preparing a media kit to give them with background information and information about the panelists
    - Send press releases to local newspapers
    - Be patient. Sometimes, you have to wait until the issue is "ripe," which is a matter of convergence of issues and events.
    - Be persistent!

6. Begin panel discussions with a reception

Inviting the panelists to a dinner or breakfast before they formally convene is an effective way to let panelists meet each other. It may be a good opportunity to invite an outside speaker for a brief, informal exchange of information and questions.

7. Hold panel meetings

- Instructions. Remind the panel of its task, and inform them that they are not just functioning as representatives of their individual sectors, but as community leaders. They should therefore think about the interest of the community as a whole.
- Decide what internal staff, if any, should attend. Although the panel meetings should be closed door deliberations, you might include the Board chair and a staff writer (see below).
- Find a writer to keep track of meeting deliberations. Recommendations come directly from these discussions and must be captured accurately, which requires a skilled note taker. You may choose to use two writers, with one concentrating on recording each statement and another focusing on the general themes to be addressed in the final report. These writers may be coalition members or professional writers commissioned specifically for the task.
- Logistics. The coalition should take extra care to ensure that the plans go as scheduled and that the meeting starts on time and ends early, rather than late.

Tips for conducting the first meeting/orientation.

The first meeting is critical to set the stage for the rest of the policy panel's work. It should have three primary objectives:

1. Understand the issue at hand
2. Narrowing down which aspects of the issue need to be addressed
3. Create a time table

8. Hold a public hearing(s)

- Publicize the hearing.

- Chose a location for the hearing(s).

- Decide who will testify. The process of recruiting people to testify is analogous to that outlined above for recruiting panelists. In fact, you may consider asking for testimony from those on the original list of potential panelists who did not end up on the final panel. Give people the opportunity to submit testimony via email if they cannot attend the hearing. Also, be strategic in soliciting invited testimony by anticipating opposing public testimony.

- The hearings should be similar to hearings for a bill in any state legislature, except that they will be conducted and facilitated by the chair of the policy panel instead of legislators. The meeting should begin with a call to order by the chair, followed by opening remarks and, possibly, lead testimony from a prominent person. For instance, lead testimony from Join Together's Discrimination policy panel hearing came from former first lady Betty Ford, and lead testimony from the Santa Rosa, CA policy panel came from Ralph Hingson, a well-known researcher on alcohol, and Jim Mosher, Director of the Marin Center on Alcohol Policy.

- Transcribe or record the hearing(s).

- A logistics organizer should see to it that all those from the public intending to testify sign in before the hearing begins and are called to testify in the order they signed in. These presenters should also provide written testimony for the record. Often, the subject matter addressed in testimony and recommendations can be clustered.

- When thinking about the logistics of the hearing, consider room size and number of people expected. An empty hearing room is never good publicity. If the media is expected, you may want to have a press release and kit to give them. Also, consider having a table outside where information about the panel is available (such as specifics about the issue or the agenda), and those testifying have a place to sign in.

9. Hold post-hearing panel meetings.

Panelists may decide after the last hearing that they still need more testimony. Additional presenters may be invited to speak at the post hearing meetings.

Generally, these meetings are a time for panelists to finalize the recommendations. Initially, the panel may have many suggestions. Because the number of recommendations that can be included in the report is limited, the panel must negotiate and come to an agreement on specific wording used to describe them. To do this, they should discuss the practical ramifications of these recommendations in the legal system, and the role of the community in implementing them. To assist the panelists, the designated staff from the coalition or sponsoring organization should synthesize the hearing transcripts and use them to provide draft recommendations for the panel's comments. As the deliberations continue, the staff should continue to provide updated draft recommendations until the panel reaches a consensus.

These negotiations are often time consuming and involve much deliberation among the panelists, which may lead to email and phone conversations after the final meeting. Although many past community panels resulted in unanimous recommendations, there are some cases in which the panel was polarized and the resulting report includes a minority opinion.

10. Writing the report.
Community groups can be creative about how they write their report. Generally, reports include a letter from the panel chair, list of panelists, an introduction, the recommendations, and some next steps for readers.

- Letter from the Panel Chair. Ask the Chair of the panel to write a letter introducing the recommendations report. This letter may include his/her personal take on the importance of the issue and the recommendations, how the panel arrived to these recommendations (i.e. the process the panel went through with hearings, etc.) and how the process affected the panelists.

- List of panel members and titles. Let the readers of the recommendation report know who was on the panel.

- Description about the sponsoring organization, partnering organizations, and contact information.

- Introduction. Much of the background information about the problem can come from the briefing papers. Use data to inform the readers of the pervasiveness of the issue and why a policy panel was necessary.

- Recommendations. Outline each recommendation. Provide a detailed description, including relevant background information, the rationale for the recommendation, and the appropriate action steps needed for implementation.

11. Disseminate the report widely.
The more people who have the report, the more useful it is going to be. Ask different partners and panel members to write their own cover letters supporting and personalizing the report and send it to their own constituencies or membership organizations. "Parents Who Host," an Ohio community dedicated to underage drinking prevention, disseminates their message through partnering with local corporations in the community. Some corporations put messages in paychecks of their employees, and others, such as grocery stores, distributed flyers. Your coalition and panel members could use their partnerships and adopt similar methods to distribute highlights of panel recommendations and information about where to get a full report.

12. Advocate for implementation of recommendations.
Recommendations take time to implement, so it is important that coalition or community members work together to prioritize. Solicit the help of local advocacy groups and meet with policy makers to 1) ask them to submit a bill proposing the legislative changes you want and 2) persuade them to vote for its passage. Have community members call or email their representatives to assure that the legislators know their constituency supports the proposed policy changes.

13. Celebrate successes.
Hold an event during the panel, after the recommendations report is printed, or during a six month or one year anniversary of the panel. Celebrating periodically is beneficial because it:
- Reenergizes and motivates those involved
- Serves as a way to thank the panelists and acknowledge their work and leadership
- Provides a media outreach opportunity

Issues of Sustainability
A policy panel's recommendations and ideas are ideally institutionalized into environmental policies, effective programs, or well-enforced laws. In 1992 Join Together conducted a national policy panel addressing youth access to alcohol, Save Lives, in which the panelists' first recommendation was to reduce

the underage legal Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) to 0.00-0.02. This recommendation was adopted by many states and became national law in 1995.

The sponsoring group, as the convener of the panel, should keep the community mobilized by emphasizing the importance of implementing the recommendations. Make use of the newly formed partnerships and alliances to get the recommendations implemented. The panel members can lead sustainability efforts by speaking before community forums and holding meetings with key stakeholders.

Suggested Reading

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