COMMUNICATION TIPS AND TOOLS
Reference: Vincent Covello, Center for Risk Communication presentation and handouts

Meeting with elected officials and key community stakeholders offers a valuable opportunity to inform others of the health department’s work, establish the department as a valuable resource, and help gain critical support for programs and services.

Following the three steps below, using the NCALHD Public Health Task Force materials, can help you build partnerships and communicate your message effectively.

1. Anticipate
   - **Know your audience.** Do your homework and find out what issues your elected official or community stakeholder currently cares about. What committees are they assigned to or what is their specialty? Knowing this will help you connect your work to theirs, helping you connect the dots between shared goals that may have not been immediately obvious.
   - **Identify local examples of interest.** Help explain the role of public health by sharing local examples that support your message and think through why your audience would be interested. Emphasize the shared connection if one exists. *You can even insert these examples into printed materials if helpful.*
   - **Think through likely questions and concerns.** You may be familiar with your audience’s perspective on an issue. If you know their stance going in, think through your response to any questions or concerns they are likely to raise. If you do not have an answer in the meeting, offer to find out and be sure to follow-up with them afterward. Remember, spending time with those who may oppose your message is a good thing. You are the public health expert, and can help answer questions, lessen opposition, and influence decision-making.

2. Prepare
   - **Keep it simple.** You may have as little as 10 to 15 minutes to get your message across, maybe more if you are meeting with a staff member or community stakeholder. Be brief and clear, and remember to avoid the use of acronyms and jargon.
   - **Speak to your audience at their level.** It is always a good idea to keep the knowledge level of your audience in mind. For example, you will be able to talk more in-depth about programs and services with someone who is familiar with public health, compared to someone whose expertise is in transportation or education.
   - **Try to be conversational in your message.** You will likely feel more prepared if you write down what you will say in your meeting beforehand and practice that message until it is comfortable. It is good to keep your tone and message conversational as you will come across more natural and genuine.

3. Practice
   - **Remember your non-verbal cues.** Once you have your message prepared, practice what you will say with attention to what your eyes, hands, and posture are also communicating. Try to practice good eye contact; too little can seem as though you are trying to hide something, while too much can appear confrontational.
   - **Verbal cues.** Remember the cues your tone of voice and volume convey. Speak in a way that is comfortable to you and if it works in your meeting, match your tone and volume to that of your audience. Do your best to speak calmly, confidently and positively.
Focus on the issue. Depending on personalities, you may find it difficult to keep the conversation focused on what you came to say. If you find it helpful, practice bridging and transitioning techniques that will help you focus the conversation on your message, ensuring the message you come in with is the one that gets across.

National public health messaging resources

In case you need additional information or tools, beyond the materials provided, these are some other available resources that you may find helpful:

1. **How to use fact sheets in communicating.** NACCHO offers a number of tips and materials for conveying your message through the use of fact sheets and personal stories.

2. **Public health communication resources.** NACCHO also offers a wealth of public health communication resources, including a customizable PowerPoint developed as a “Public Health 101” guide that can be used to help inform audiences of what health departments do.

3. **Talking about public health.** ASPH has compiled a booklet outlining the study areas of public health, but also describes the function and roles of public health that complements the task force materials provided.

4. **This is public health toolkit.** Part of the “This is Public Health” campaign, ASPH developed the toolkit to serve as a resource to anyone working to educate others about the impact and importance of public health.

Other communication and advocacy tips

1. **Building relationships.** Remember to thank those you meet with for their time and consideration at both the end of your meeting, and after, with either a card of follow-up letter. Remember to reiterate your message and provide additional information if requested. Particularly with legislators, be patient and respectively persistent when following up. It is also a good idea to thank the legislative staff member or aide for their help setting up your meeting. This NACCHO website offers more information on how to build relationships with policymakers.

2. **Courtesy.** When meeting with an elected official, remember to address them by their elected title (e.g., Representative/Senator/Secretary “Last Name”).

3. **Attire.** Research shows the color blue comes across well and indicates a person is trust-worthy. The color beige and striped patterns appear to have the opposite effect. Be careful with patterns and bright colors as these can be distracting and when in doubt, dress conservatively (Covello, N.D.).

4. **Meeting with legislators.** ASPH offers a few tips for meeting with members of Congress that also apply to meeting with local or state elected officials.

5. **Other Advocacy Tips.** APHA provides a number of tips and resources for public health advocacy, including notes on the process, finding elected officials and visit do’s and don’ts.