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Using National News Events to Stimulate Local Awareness of Public Policy Issues

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Synopsis

Community leaders in Atlanta, GA, the Detroit and Lansing, MI, areas, and San Francisco, CA, participated in a demonstration of techniques to disseminate

information and increase public awareness of the recommendations from the Surgeon General's Workshop on Drunk Driving, held in December 1988. Local officials worked with the Public Health Service's Office for Substance Abuse Prevention, of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, to educate and inform the public about the workshop recommendations as well as other alcohol-related concerns, and to encourage public involvement in their communities with the issue of alcohol-impaired driving and other alcohol-related concerns.

With minimal assistance from Federal agencies and Washington-based health and public interest groups, the communities developed unique approaches to generating local television, radio, and newspaper coverage of an event that had originated as national news.

The events demonstrated that, with minimal Federal resources and support, local groups can create media attention in conjunction with national news, and local media events can lead to successful community activism. The techniques can be applied by other community groups to gain sufficient news media attention to encourage the public to organize around issues of common concern.

WHEN high-level public figures or organizations announce an action or decision, information usually is communicated to the public in a highly centralized, from-the-top-down approach.

Typically, the press office of an agency arranges national press coverage through press releases, press conferences, and direct communication with national reporters. Individual communities usually receive the

information through news service reports and network broadcasts. The process of communicating policy issues to the local level can be made more effective using strategies that local interest groups can apply in working with local news media, newspapers, radio, or television.

Media advocacy is a term for using news media to heighten public awareness of selected issues and to help bring about change in public policy in order to serve the public interest. The technique is derived from political campaigning. Community groups can mobilize as media advocates, for example, by effectively gaining press attention to highlight a public health issue with a community focus. Issues such as local environmental concerns, the national drug control strategy, pending community legislation, or alcohol-impaired driving can be addressed with similar strategies. They all have the ability to generate public interest and involvement.

We describe media advocacy strategies that were used locally in connection with the release of a set of recommendations (1) resulting from a Public Health Service initiative against drunk driving, together with the strategies' potential for implementation at the local level in other locations.

During the last several years, the Public Health Service and Congress have responded to growing public concern over the problem of alcohol-impaired driving. In the spring of 1988, in response to letters, testimony, and groups representing victims, the House of Representatives and the Senate called on the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service to declare drunk driving to be a national health crisis and to take steps directed to bringing the problem under control.

The Surgeon General's Workshop on Drunk Driving, the first major event undertaken by the Office of the Surgeon General to address the issue, was held December 14-16, 1988, in Washington, DC. The 120 members of the 11 workshop panels made more than 200 recommendations in the following areas:

- alcoholic beverage pricing and availability
- advertising and marketing
- epidemiology and data management
- education
- judicial and administrative processes
- law enforcement
- transportation and alcohol service policies
- injury control
- youth and other special populations
- treatment of alcohol problems, and
- citizen advocacy.

Nearly 25,000 deaths and more than 500,000 injuries result from alcohol-related traffic accidents each year.

Recent reports on alcohol, health, and traffic safety, including the relationship between alcohol use and impaired driving (2, 3), have raised the attention of the research community and public health activists. Growing numbers of citizen groups have formed to sponsor community prevention programs to educate the public about driving under the influence of alcohol.

Reflecting local interests in the issues, those involved in the workshop and its related followup activities at the Federal level decided to develop a strategy to assure that the workshop proceedings and recommendations were well publicized and understood. The workshop recommendations were the most recent specific guidelines for reducing alcohol-impaired driving, and addressed a wide range of alcohol-related problems as well. The proceedings, including the recommendations, were released May 31, 1989.

Strategy Development

Planning for public dissemination of the proceedings was undertaken by a Federal advisory group on workshop followup activities consisting of representatives from the Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Justice, and Transportation. In order to facilitate public awareness of the recommendations, a communications strategy was devised to try to overcome the problem of being overshadowed by other national news that day.

At the national level, the release of the proceedings benefitted from press attention given to then Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. A strategy was decided upon to publicize the recommendations through key constituency groups in different regions of the country, where locally committed persons were well positioned to arouse interest, generate support, and outline issues of specific local concern.

Local Efforts

Locally, experts were available to provide information, expertise, research strategies, a local perspective, and outreach functions. The partnership between the local groups and the Federal agencies to plan the release of the recommendations was designed to use the national news of the release of the workshop recommendations to create local press attention on broader alcohol-related issues and to keep attention focused on the local level.

Three local groups were chosen to participate, based on their interests, geographic diversity, knowledge of the issues, and participation in the workshop. Their involvement was important to ensuring that local news coverage of the recommendations reflected the local interests.

The local groups participating were from the Lansing and Detroit, MI, areas, San Francisco, CA, and Atlanta, GA. Community leaders were introduced to project officials in Washington, DC, on March 27, 1989. In addition to representatives from the three sites and the government agencies, the meeting was attended by three Washington-based public health interest groups, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and the Advocacy Institute. The role of the Washington-based groups was to provide information to the localities and help generate attention with Washington-based press and media sources.

After the initial meeting each of the participating organizations members returned home with a specific agenda for advancing the recommendations of the workshop and providing a communication link with the Washington-based organizations. Throughout the project, the Public Health Service provided information, minimal resources, and channels of communication for the localities and the public interest groups.

The Michigan group decided that its primary goal in the project would be to use the announcement of the workshop recommendations as a catalyst for organizing local groups. A secondary goal was to generate support and media attention for the recommendations.

The San Francisco project was led by the Marin Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems. The group planned to emphasize press coverage of the recommendations, develop a body of information to serve as a resource for future project efforts, and focus on existing or impending local initiatives as they related to the recommendations.

The Atlanta group was directed by staff members of Families in Action. They devised a focused, two-part strategy to conduct a poll on alcohol issues among Atlanta's teenagers. The goal of the poll was to ask questions usually not asked of teenagers. For example, while the alcohol industry has long contended that a primary source of alcohol for teenagers is their parents' liquor cabinets, the poll indicated this not to be the case.

The poll was administered to more than 3,000 teens from the Atlanta metropolitan area between the ages of 12 and 19. The poll was designed to show (a) teenagers' attitudes toward alcohol advertising, (b) their drinking prevalence, (c) the availability of alcohol to minors, and (d) their knowledge of legal issues concerning alcohol ("A Poll About Alcohol," communication from the National Drug Information Center, Families in Action, and the Cork Institute, Morehouse Medical School, to Public Health Service's Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, May 18, 1989).

The results were released at a press conference the

same day as the announcement of the recommendations and were available to the news media and a group of Atlanta area spokespersons on alcohol issues.

In addition to the Washington press conference with the Surgeon General, each of the local groups decided to hold a press conference and introduce a local aspect to the story. Press kits were prepared in each of the communities and contained press releases, prepared statements, summaries of the workshop recommendations, fact sheets about alcohol-impaired driving, lists of local resource persons, and, in Atlanta, the results of the poll of teenagers. The timing of the local conferences allowed the press to cover the national release of the recommendations as well as the local stories.

The Michigan press conferences received wide newspaper, television, and radio coverage statewide as more than 100 State and local groups were invited to officially cosponsor the State coalition's efforts (4-6). The Atlanta press conference received significant local coverage, with a summary of the poll results appearing on the front page of the Atlanta Constitution the day after the press conference, and an interview on nationally syndicated Cable News Network (7).

In San Francisco, the group decided to make the press conference a visual event, enhancing coverage by presenting current examples of alcoholic beverage marketing practices. The press conference featured a stuffed toy bull terrier that was being distributed by a brewing company as a promotion with a tag indicating that the toy was appropriate for ages 3 and older, and a price table listing examples of products from local stores to illustrate that a six-pack of beer may be less expensive than a six-pack of soda. The San Francisco press conference was held in the lobby of San Francisco General Hospital with participants chosen for familiarity to local audiences (8-10).

All three communities led highly successful and visible media events that assured wide public awareness and understanding of the workshop recommendations as well as other alcohol-related issues. The success of the local media press conferences, followup articles, and interviews demonstrated that successful dissemination of information did not have to rely solely on a single Federal agency. The local groups provided the essential regional perspective and community concerns, and were able to focus on other issues related to drunk driving as well. For example, the group in San Francisco generated interest in the topic of alcohol advertising to youths.

Assessment of Results

Several months after the press conferences and media events, local officials of each area reported similar

results from their efforts. They reached several conclusions:

1. A news event can be used as a catalyst for successful community organizing.

2. Minimal resources are needed from a central source. The groups and persons chosen for the project, by being already involved, provided sufficient resources to serve as a catalyst for further action. The information and the channels for communication, such as conference calls, provided by the agencies involved, Washington interest groups, and the local projects, were important resources.

3. Local groups can successfully create local media attention in conjunction with a national news or policy announcement. While national events may receive coverage locally by way of news services and other national outlets, local groups can create additional interest by maintaining a strong focus on the community. As the experiences in the three localities demonstrated, the focus can be very different among communities.

The Michigan group reported that the press conferences served as a catalyst for community activism and coalition building in the State. The Michigan Campaign for Surgeon General Koop's Drinking and Driving Recommendations, a coalition of local health groups, was established and plans a conference on community strategies to prevent impaired driving. The group is developing an issue paper on legislation and policy changes to address alcohol-impaired driving.

The Atlanta poll spurred new partnerships within the community. Groups that previously had not worked together have begun to do so, and are now coordinating efforts to address community issues. The poll of teenagers continues to receive attention and is frequently cited in articles and reports about alcohol-related issues. Families in Action expects to develop the poll into a more scientific study. An unexpected result is that a county solicitor is assembling a group to sponsor a seminar for judges who deal with youth and alcohol issues.

With confidence and experience gained from the press initiative, community members in the San Francisco Bay area mobilized to prevent a local major league baseball stadium from distributing flashlights bearing a brewer's advertising logo to fans 15 years of age and younger, and are involved in garnering support for the California Alcohol Tax Initiative Campaign.

The local efforts helped citizens to see that they can effectively organize around an issue, gain national public attention, and begin change within their community. The role of the Federal agencies was significant because it provided added approval and credibility to the project. Local groups provided outreach capabilities, grassroots organizing, and the ability to localize an

issue within a community, an aspect which is vital to the success of such a communications project. While Federal involvement is not critical to the success of a project of this nature, the combination provided a partnership that produced wider coverage, increased support, and long term community commitment.

The involvement of the Surgeon General gave local public health activists added credibility in helping to shape local policy on alcohol. Dedicated public health activists found that by directing news media attention to the issues that they believed important, they were able to highlight the issues in a way to gain significant media attention. By taking charge of the issue, talk show guests, press conference speakers, and other local experts were able to preempt industry arguments. With national support, communities were able to direct the media to report on the issues from a public health perspective.

Although a unique set of circumstances permitted addressing alcohol-impaired driving from a national perspective, similar efforts involving public health or other issues of concern need not rely on the same circumstances and persons to be effective. Other communities can learn from the basic lessons in their efforts to mobilize in order to increase public awareness of important issues.

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