

Do you have an idea that could benefit your community? Is there a concern in the back of your mind that keeps nagging at you? Is there a law that needs changing? A community problem that someone should do something about? Could that someone be you?

Public concern about a policy issue develops over time. Frequently, people become disturbed by a situation, which results in discussion, tension, and conflict that finally leads to a search for solutions. There are often many issues surrounding a public problem or concern.

The terms *public issue* and *public policy* can be defined in several ways. A private issue becomes a public issue when (1) consequences of individual or group action go beyond those directly involved, and (2) there is an effort by others to influence those consequences. As more people become involved, community leaders, elected officials, and interested citizens become aware of the concern. Discussion clarifies and defines the problem or opportunity . . . the gap between “what is” and “what could be.” The issue emerges as different ideas about what could be done are developed. Public issues are controversial because different groups of people are affected in different ways. Even when a goal is agreed upon, different ways of reaching the goal or financing the outcome may be favored by different individuals or groups. An advantage or benefit for some may be a disadvantage or cost for others. For example, the problem may

Public Policy: From Ideas to Action

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be the high adult illiteracy rate in a community. The policy options might include adult reading programs, parent education classes, or school efforts to reduce dropouts. Doing nothing (maintaining the status quo) is also an option.

Public policy consists of statements or principles underlying government action. Policy is expressed in local, state, and federal government action as legislation, resolutions, programs, regulations, appropriations, administrative practices, and court decisions. Less formally, policy also includes customs and traditional ways of doing things.

Getting Started

Citizen participation means that individuals exercise their freedom of choice to decide when, where, and how to become involved in community decision-making. This choice is fundamental to a democratic society. Individuals participate when they have reasons that are important to them. People get involved in different issues, activities, and groups to the extent that

their personal needs and interests are appealed to and met.

Most citizens are willing to become involved in the public decision-making process, but they may hesitate because they don't know how to get started. Factors that promote participation include learning about how the government or policy-making process works; developing leadership and communication skills; analyzing issues and finding possible solutions; building networks and coalitions; and mobilizing

human, financial, and community resources to accomplish goals. Self confidence is gained through study, practice, and experience.

A citizen who wants to be more effective in influencing policy decisions has many choices. The first thing to do is to get information and decide how to become involved. Everyone who votes or attends an event for a candidate, cause, or political group is starting to influence public policy. Attending meetings and discussion groups is a good first step, particularly for the person who is somewhat hesitant. Observation is an easy, non-threatening way to begin to get involved. Visiting on an informal basis can be the start of networking and building contacts. There is no political endeavor too small to receive attention. Volunteering to stuff envelopes or do other routine tasks is sometimes a useful way to begin. However, studying current issues and deciding on a course of action—through mobilizing a group and/or influencing the decision makers—will often be more effective.



Set Your Priorities

You will probably find that you are interested in a number of issues. Since your time, energy, and other resources are limited, set priorities and prepare an action plan.

Study the policy making system and the issues. Find out what the current situation is and if there are existing laws or regulations. If there are, how are they carried out? Are they effective in meeting their purposes?

Find out what is on people's minds—their concerns, needs, and wants. Sort out personal wants from community concerns or needs. Focus on important issues that affect a number of people, not just a few. Some examples of current concerns in many communities are: child care, health care, food safety, school systems, substance abuse, literacy, crime, homelessness, and television programming and advertising. Talk to several people about your concern and your desire to initiate a policy change.

If your neighborhood is the most important thing to you, then a starting point may be to get involved with the block association or neighborhood watch or similar groups. If no organization exists, examine the needs of the community and consider starting a group or project. If your primary concern is literacy or consumer skills, you can join and support an organization that is working to establish a reading program or a local consumer information center, lobby on your own, or work for candidates who share your views. Lobbying or advocacy means influencing other people's ideas; it need not be a formal action only at the capitol.

Some people enjoy being "center stage," others prefer "building the sets." Both make important contributions. Citizens with experience in basic organizational skills (often gained as a parent, on the job, in managing a church group, civic club, or in other volunteer work) offer valuable services to study groups or political action groups. Citizens who are willing to share

information (names, contacts, phone numbers, community backgrounds), who can make and follow through on a time and task commitment, and who are able to meet changing deadlines and to pitch in where needed, are essential to volunteer citizen groups.

Think about the type of activities you like to do. For example, if you like to read and do research, you can provide a service by pulling together data to develop an issue and possible solutions. If talking on the telephone is your favorite occupation, you might volunteer to call people to set up meetings, interview others about their ideas and opinions, or get out the vote.

Find or Form a Group to Work With

Moving from ideas to action involves getting your suggestions into the decision-making process. What steps can you take . . . and what can you do to make your efforts effective? Once you have identified an issue that interests you, find out who else is working on or is interested in that issue. This often leads you to a group that might support your work. You may find others with similar interests in an existing organization or group that works on the issue.

Ask the city office or county clerk's office for lists of citizen advisory boards, terms of office of current members, and when and how new appointments are made. Contact your local League of Women Voters or other groups for information. You can form a group (such as a task force, committee, coalition, or study group) by initiating a meeting of people interested in a particular issue. If your group has an issue that no existing mechanism is set up to handle, ask that a city or county committee be appointed to study and make recommendations, and ask that you or some of your group's volunteers be appointed. Sometimes issues cross city, county, and state lines, so you must find out who the decision makers are.

Before joining an existing group, make sure your interests are similar.

Will the majority of your work be directed at solving a problem? Or at trying to get the group to work on the problem? Look for a group that is receptive to new ideas, methods, and people. Some groups are interested in solving problems, while others only want to discuss the issue or just complain. Look for support, encouragement, and resources to bring about change.

In a group, people are often influenced by members who have expertise and are good speakers, those they like, those they trust, and those whose ideas are not greatly different from their own. In the political arena, decisions are influenced by resources such as financial contributions for campaigns, people to help with campaign activities, and votes for election or re-election.

If differences of opinion occur, as they will, make sure the process of conflict resolution and reaching consensus is carried out.

A network is a set of relationships (personal, political, social, or religious). When it's not possible for you to make contact directly with the influential person you are trying to reach, you may be able to identify someone in the influential person's "network" who can sponsor you and arrange the meeting.

Make an Action Plan

If your goal is to write legislation to establish a community project or program, your position will be strengthened if you can provide a "resource inventory" with information on the human, financial, and physical resources available, as well as possibilities for obtaining or developing other needed resources. A resource inventory can help get a law passed or with less formal methods of implementing projects.

Once the available resources are in line with the objectives, an action plan should be developed and written down. Look for alternative strategies for meeting the objectives. The plan should specify individual responsibilities and a time by which each action will be completed. The plan coordinates

resources so the overall goal is accomplished and results are evaluated.

Some people are willing to help plan. Others will legitimize the plan. Some will provide resources and some will actually do the work. It is helpful to have people with a variety of interests and talents working as a team.

Speak Up Effectively

When you are ready to go to policy makers with your recommendations, remember that clear, concise communication is of critical importance. Two-way communication can take place through a personal visit or telephone call. Your listening should be as careful as your speaking.

A letter of inquiry or expression of concern is a good first step in establishing a relationship with a public official. It is helpful to provide written information in advance of your visit. Be prepared for some informal conversation at the beginning, which serves as an ice breaker and builds trust and interest. Busy politicians sometimes prefer that you visit with one of their staff people. Do not expect a commitment at the time of your visit. The concerns of others, as well as your own, must be addressed.

You don't have to travel to the capitol or the county seat to lobby. You can get acquainted with your elected representatives when they are in your community. Attend their public meetings, stay a few minutes afterwards and introduce yourself (with a brief mention of your interest in an issue) and follow up with a telephone call or letter.

Accuracy and thoroughness are the foundation for a public presentation. Whether you are acting as an individual or representing a group, be well organized when you testify. Do your homework. Find out what information is available, what the current legislation is (or is not), and what positions are held by other groups.

If you expect to testify at a public hearing or a legislative subcommittee, you'll find it helpful to attend a hearing to see how things operate, who makes

State the problem or issue

Describe what is being done, and status of the issue

State what needs to be done, support you've received

Explain action you want and benefits to reader

Dear Volunteer:

A severe decline in revenue has been predicted for Sunshine County for next fiscal year. The County Commission has proposed cutting funding for the library by half. A cut of this magnitude will reduce services to the many people who use the library.

Besides books, the library provides access to government documents, videotapes, books on audio tape, story time for preschool children, summer reading and adult learn-to-read programs. An average of 80 people use the library each day during the summer and almost twice that many during the winter.

The proposed budget cut is one of a series of ideas being proposed to meet the expected decline in revenue. The commission expects to make a final decision in two months.

If the budget cut is implemented, the number of hours the library is open would be limited, the librarian's salary would be reduced, and the library assistant position would be eliminated.

At this point, we are encouraging an open dialogue about this funding cut. Several local organizations (Literacy League, Friends of the Library, and Extension Homemakers Council) are discussing the need for a task force to study alternatives.

One possibility is to recruit volunteers to help keep the library open at its current schedule. The librarian might train volunteers to work at the check-out counter, reshelve books, or carry on some special programs. Increasing income by charging fees is also a possibility.

I am asking you to join this task force to discuss options to resolve this issue. As a regular user of the library and volunteer in the adult reading program, we think you'll have good ideas about how to keep library services available. We need your suggestions on how to resolve this issue.

I'll call you in a few days so we can discuss your participation on this task force in more detail.

This letter describes a community problem—funding cuts for the library. The writer is developing a task force of volunteers to study the issues and possible options for action. The sample letter and outline in the margin offer a format and ideas for composing a letter inviting others to work with you on a project or develop ways of resolving an issue.

the decisions, what is the speaking order for testimony, supporting and opposing proposals, and other mechanics that will help you feel at ease.

Get in contact with the agency sponsoring the public hearing. Ask to be put on their mailing list. Request copies of staff reports, notices of meetings, and agendas; study these documents to learn background information and ideas about priorities. Provide copies of your presentation to the hearing panel.

Many individuals find it helpful to organize their verbal presentations—whether informally on a one-to-one basis when expressing views at a group or public meeting, or giving formal testimony at a public hearing—using the same guidelines as a letter.

Write Persuasive Letters

Written communications (a letter or a "fax") are helpful in expressing your opinions on a specific issue or bill. Consider these guidelines for writing to officials:

- Write on only one subject at a time.
- First, put your thoughts in draft form. Review and eliminate the non-essentials, then organize your ideas into a brief, clear letter. Try to keep the letter to one typewritten (or legibly handwritten) page.
- Briefly state who you are and why you are concerned. If you are writing for a group, give its name and membership (numbers are important).
- Explain what action you think should be taken and why.

- If you are sharing a personal experience, tell how it relates to other people.
- If you are writing about technical information, indicate your competence to do so.
- If you are writing about a particular bill, identify it by number and name or content.
- Be courteous at all times; personal when appropriate. Never threaten, directly or by implication.
- Close with a statement of thanks and an expression of continued interest in future action.

Time your letter so it will arrive before or at the time the subject is being discussed. It's also useful to provide information or ideas early in the legislative process. Enclosures of technical data or other supporting information are generally more effective than a long, detailed letter. Don't limit your letters to support or opposition. Send a note of appreciation. Politicians, too, like praise.

If you are writing to several public officials on the same subject, do not send photocopied or identical letters. Individualize— *use your own words*. Individual letters are more effective than petitions.

Let Your Enthusiasm Show

Whether you call it advocacy, lobbying or public relations, the goal is communications aimed at producing a specific result. You are the only person who can decide how good a job you can— and will— do. You are the only one who can define what a good job is.

Everyone has a certain set of talents, skills, energy, and enthusiasm. Most of us aren't aware of all we could do. Few

of us use all of our abilities. And many explanations are offered for lack of action, such as:

- I never had the chance to go to college (or finish college),
- I have too many other responsibilities to worry about,
- I'm too far out of the mainstream of what's happening,
- I don't have time, or
- I'm just a housewife, (mother, blue collar worker, secretary, farmer, etc.)

Many times the real explanation is fear of trying something new, fear of making mistakes, fear of failure, or fear that other people will think we are conceited or showing off.

Two types of problems are often encountered by those who are active in the political process. One is finding the time and energy to develop your ideas and join with others to initiate action. Review the principles of time management, enlist your family's cooperation, delegate or eliminate some low priority tasks or activities to make time for your new mission.

The other centers on building the emotional strength to persevere despite setbacks and criticism that are part of negotiation and compromise in the political process. It helps to develop a support group of people you trust. Sharing problems and finding that you are not alone in your concerns maintains motivation. It's particularly useful to talk things over with someone who has been working on similar issues.

Positive thinking gives power. You project a confident image when you are well groomed, appropriately dressed, standing tall, well informed, and showing enthusiasm.

Many concerns touch our lives. We often think someone else should do something about them. Every citizen can become involved. To influence local issues, keep in mind the needs for factual information, networking, support groups, and coalitions, as well as careful issue analysis before taking action. Don't forget to thank public officials who have represented you well. Continue to be an active citizen even when your own needs have been met and your project accomplished.

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