



Public Health Advocacy

Toolkit

2007



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive



THE INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC HEALTH IN IRELAND



PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Advocacy is a powerful tool in public health, central to protecting and promoting health and well-being. This toolkit aims to help all those working to improve health to think through, plan and undertake advocacy work.

The toolkit provides a model for the advocacy process and can be used to identify training needs, point to resources for developing skills and competencies and provide a framework for action.

It is available both as a printed and web based resource. This printed version provides a basic guide to advocacy while the website (<http://advocacy.phaii.org/>), in addition to the toolkit, has cross-referenced resources to provide further information on each section of the model.

There is scope for the toolkit to continue to grow and develop, particularly if others in the public health community take ownership of it and contribute feedback, resources and suggestions.

What is 'advocacy' in the context of public health?

Advocacy is increasingly being recognised as a key element of the public health role in promoting health and well-being. In the context of the toolkit, public health includes all and any work which aims to protect and improve health and involves people from all sectors and disciplines.

Advocacy can be defined as:

'the pursuit of influencing outcomes – including public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions – that directly affect people's lives'.¹

The importance of advocacy in the health promotion and public health arena was highlighted in a statement from the Fifth Global Conference on Health Promotion:

'Advocacy is an important tool and includes lobbying, political organisation and activism, overcoming bureaucratic inertia, identifying a champion for the cause, enabling community leaders and mediating to manage conflict.'²

¹ The Advocacy Institute (www.advocacy.org)

² Ministerial Statement for the WHO Fifth Global Conference on Health Promotion, Mexico City, 2000

As with other work to improve and protect health, advocacy requires careful planning to ensure effectiveness. An effective advocate has been described as someone with the ability to:

'utilise available evidence and knowledge about an issue to push for improved public health over the long-term'.³

Advocacy can be carried out by the people affected by an issue or problem, by other people representing them, or by both groups together. Advocacy is often more powerful if those affected by the problem or issue are involved in or lead the process.

When acting as an advocate by representing others, it is important to ensure that their opinions and interests are presented fairly. This means having an understanding of the issue from a range of perspectives – for example, from the evidence base found in the published literature as well as how the issue is perceived by those most directly involved. In some instances it may be necessary to have permission from those affected by the issue to advocate on their behalf. Having permission or the 'right' to advocate for other people is known as 'legitimacy'.

It is also important to ensure that advocacy work is supported within relevant organisational systems, by managers, and by external funders but it may be the case that such support will in itself require 'advocacy'.

³ Ashbridge, M (2004). Public place restrictions on smoking in Canada: assessing the role of the state, media, science and public health advocacy. *Social Science & Medicine*, 58, 13-24

Principles

The toolkit builds on the idea that work on health must address the root causes of illness and disease, including the social, environmental, biological and psychological factors that impact on health and well-being together with the provision of effective services.

The key principles central to public health advocacy are:

Human Rights - recognising health as a basic human right as the basis for all public health advocacy.

- ***Equity*** - advocating for equality of access, participation and outcomes in health and health service utilisation and for the reduction of inequalities in health.
- ***Democracy*** - enabling people, communities and organisations to participate in decision- making which impacts on health.
- ***Inclusion*** - working in partnership with people, communities and organisations to ensure inclusion across sectors, communities, individuals and representative organisations.

Background

The Advocacy Toolkit was initially developed by participants on the Institute of Public Health in Ireland's (IPHI) 'Leadership for Building a Healthy Society Programme'. Further development of the Toolkit has been taken forward by the Public Health Alliance for the island of Ireland (PHA) with funding and support from the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) the IPHI and the Ireland and Northern Ireland Public Health Observatory (INIsPHO).

