



How Policy Analysis Can Inform Efforts to Improve Social Programs

Judith E. Barnstone, New Mexico Highlands University

According to the *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers, all professional social workers have a responsibility to promote improvements in policies related to social justice and welfare. Social policies create programs and set regulations and funding levels that profoundly affect the welfare of the disadvantaged, disempowered groups served by social workers. When social workers go beyond carrying through existing policies and regulations to call for improvements, they are engaged in what is called “policy practice.”

This brief draws insights and recommendations from three leading textbooks listed in the footer, synthesizing what they have to say about the key ingredients of effective policy practice – problem identification, coalition building, campaigning, legislative advocacy, and monitoring implementation. To inform advocates and analysts alike, the brief offers a concise encapsulation of current wisdom about what it takes for a coalition of diverse allies to enact and implement legislation addressing an important social problem.

Documenting and Dramatizing a Problem

Promoting policy change starts with uncovering an unmet need or identifying a social inefficiency or inequity to be addressed. Action can be motivated by scientific research on social problems and the inadequacy of current remedies. Solid data can clarify the scope and possible causes of problems and the populations at risk, and research can reveal the impact and deficiencies of current programs. Translated into clear language accessible to the general public and lawmakers, research reports can provide a powerful rationale for legislative change.

But research is not the only way, or always the most effective way, to build momentum for policy improvements. Crises and tragedies can raise a problem’s salience, revealing the need for immediate action. Often, the best people to identify problems and call for corrective action are the people hit by crises or preventable tragedies – and the social work professionals who reach out to help them. Field workers and their agencies can share the stories of those impacted or empower community members to speak up for themselves. More extensive research reports can then be used to document the extent and nature of social needs dramatized in first-hand stories.

Coalition Building

Social workers rarely achieve effective legislative change entirely on their own. Often partnerships of field workers, service agencies, impacted populations, and researchers are forged during the course of problem identification, and they can be the starting point for building coalitions, action-oriented networks to further a shared cause. Lawmakers, community leaders, and bureaucrats can also be partners in effective coalitions. The more diverse the set of partners, the louder the voice and greater the influence the coalition will likely achieve.

The most effective policy practitioners reach out to various participants with what author Rodney Ellis calls “shared VIBES” – that is, complementary values, interests, beliefs, ethics, and slants. Coalition-builders aim to diversify available knowledge and talent by drawing in partners skilled at data collection, outreach, messaging, marketing, and the cultivation of relationships with media and lawmakers. Additionally, they aim to build contact lists that the coalition can use to mobilize members and raise funds for campaigns. Finally, leaders must step forward to keep a coalition focused and assure that it speaks not only loudly, but with clarity and consistency.

Campaigning for Change and Advocating Legislation

A push for policy change starts by raising the profile of a cause and building public consensus for action.

June 25, 2014

<https://scholars.org>

Communications experts, drawing upon data, analysis and stories, work to distill core messages to document the problem, suggest a solution, and highlight the strengths of the proposed solution while acknowledging and parrying opposition arguments. Campaigns may need different messages for different audiences, disseminated through residential and electronic mailings, media coverage, community events, and letters to the editor, lawmakers and other authorities. Communications experts use relationships with media gatekeepers to pitch human interest or news stories. Websites and new media, like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have minimal costs, but the campaign may need to raise resources for other, costly media approaches.

After the public campaign is under way, the next challenge is to get proposals on the legislative agenda. Coalition members or paid, registered lobbyists must communicate the importance and urgency of the issue and find an effective legislative sponsor. Once the issue and proposed legislation are on the agenda, lobbyists and other advocates can assess lawmaker support, educate and persuade the undecided, and “make the ask” to solicit a vote on a bill.

Expert and citizen testimony can support the legislative push. Opinion poll results can be disseminated to demonstrate constituent support, and coalition members can make phone calls and send letters to decision makers to demonstrate a united front and exert pressure on lawmakers. These activities may have to be renewed each time the relevant proposal comes before a committee or legislative chamber for one of a series of votes.

Implementation and Continuous Evaluation

Building consensus and securing a favorable legislative outcome take perseverance. To keep spirits up, advocates must celebrate each legislator persuaded and each hurdle surmounted; and all coalition participants must be prepared to work through setbacks and accept compromises as incremental steps towards a larger goal. What is more, passing a new law is not the end of it. Advocates must monitor implementation by bureaucrats, push for improvements, and watch for shortfalls or unwanted revisions. Expert allies must be kept involved to pinpoint where implementation can be made more effective.

From problem identification, to campaigning for and winning policy changes, to ensuring optimal implementation, policy practice is challenging and involves social workers in building wide-ranging partnerships. Supporters of improved policies need not fly blind, however, because books like those used here offer pointers for effective legislative advocacy.

Read more in Linda K. Cummins, Katharine V. Byers, and Laura V. Pedrick, *Policy Practice for Social Workers: New Strategies for a New Era* (Pearson, 2010); Rodney A. Ellis, *Impacting Social Policy: A Practitioner's Guide to Analysis and Action* (Cengage Learning, 2002); and Richard Hoefer, *Advocacy Practice for Social Justice, Second Edition* (Lyceum Books, 2011).