



# Prevention Collaboration in Action

Bringing the Right  
Collaborators on Board

## Collaborating with Policymakers to Strengthen Substance Misuse Prevention Programming

Preventing substance misuse is a complicated endeavor. To be most effective, prevention programs need to address the broader context in which misuse occurs.

Affecting that context may require policy interventions such as laws, regulations, or ordinances that impact the supply of, demand for, or harm done by substances. In fact, some of the most successful prevention efforts have been policy changes. For example, increasing the minimum purchase age of alcohol from 18 to 21 was strongly associated with reduced rates of youth drinking, binge drinking, alcohol-impaired traffic accidents, and other consequences.<sup>1</sup>

Policy changes are different than other types of prevention activities, in part because they require action by policymakers. Policymakers include a wide range of individuals across all levels and branches of government who have the authority to make policy decisions. Collaborating with policymakers can facilitate the development of policies that have the potential to prevent or reduce substance misuse and its consequences.

This tool identifies the types of policymakers prevention might engage, explores potential goals that can be achieved through collaboration with this important group of stakeholders, offers examples of potential collaborations, and presents tips for collaborating effectively.

### Examples of Policymakers

- State legislators
- Federal and state agency heads
- School board members
- County board supervisors
- County executive officers
- State advisory panel members
- Congressional representatives
- Mayors
- City council members
- Governors

## WHY COLLABORATE?

The goal of collaborating with policymakers is to inform their decision-making in ways that benefit substance misuse prevention efforts and improve the behavioral health of communities. Often, this can involve advocacy and education about prevention goals, needs, and best practices. Prevention professionals typically engage policymakers for three reasons:

- 1. To advocate for policy change related to specific areas of need**, such as restrictions on the sale of legal substances (for example, alcohol, tobacco, and vapes); increased funding for supportive employment programs; or school district requirements to offer social-emotional learning or multi-tiered systems of support. Prevention practitioners cannot encourage the passing of specific legislation (see Advocacy vs. Lobbying, below) but they can educate about the general need for policy change.
- 2. To build support for evidence-based substance-misuse-prevention programming.** Sometimes referred to as promoting a “culture of prevention,” this involves educating policymakers on the value of prevention programming relative to other domains on the behavioral health care continuum.<sup>2</sup> Such support can create a policy environment more conducive to expanding support (such as funding) for substance misuse prevention. It can also better ensure that prevention has “a seat at the table” in substance misuse-related policy discussions (for example, whether to include indicated prevention services in health insurance coverage expansions).
- 3. To obtain support for non-policy decisions in accordance with rules, regulations, or standards.** For example, a prevention coalition might need

### What Might Collaboration with Policymakers Look Like?

- Providing general education on the importance of prevention
- Providing information and data on the key substance use issues facing your community
- Explaining why and how current or pending policies might help or hinder prevention efforts
- Sharing data on association between current policies and substance misuse patterns
- Introducing ideas for new policies that could support prevention efforts
- Sharing outcomes from evaluations of current policy initiatives or suggesting improvements
- Requesting non-policy-related changes or actions that require policymaker authorization (for example, permission from the school board to hold an after-hours workplace prevention program for teachers)

permission from a local school board before installing prevention messaging campaign signs on school grounds.

## WHAT MAKES COLLABORATING WITH POLICYMAKERS UNIQUE?

In some ways, collaborating with policymakers is the same as collaborating with any community partner. The choice of who to engage is determined by your outreach capacity and your assessment of who can help address your data-informed prevention goals. But collaborating with policymakers also differs in many ways from collaborating with other community partners.

Consider that:

- Policymakers face competing demands on their time and often lack specialized knowledge about substance misuse.
- Substance misuse, behavioral health, or health care, in general, may be only a small sliver of a policymaker's focus.
- Policymakers often have expansive or total discretion in deciding whether to collaborate with—or even listen to—prevention professionals.
- Collaborating with policymakers can require understanding and following unique rules and laws (for example, to ensure that advocacy does not cross the line into lobbying or regulatory comments are submitted in appropriate formats).
- Many policymakers are removed from the implementation of their policy decisions and so may need to be informed about how their decisions might play out.

Because of their unique position, collaboration with policymakers is often less direct than other forms of collaboration. For example, it is more likely to focus on education (to inform decisions) rather than working together on concrete tasks such as participating in joint strategic planning or sharing resources for service delivery.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Preliminary planning is recommended before engaging in any prevention activity; collaborating with policymakers is no different. In fact, it is even more important than usual because policymakers have limited time to meet with any individual constituent or group.

- **Follow the principles of strategic planning.** As with any partner, be strategic about how and why you engage policymakers. Collaborating with policymakers poses unique opportunities and challenges, but SAMHSA’s Strategic Prevention Framework is always the place to start.
- **Know why you want to collaborate.**<sup>3</sup> Use your needs assessment findings to identify your desired policy changes. Consider the unique powers of policymakers compared to other community partners and focus on those issues that other collaborations cannot address. For instance, policymakers can enact changes that address the root causes of substance use, such as expanding health insurance parity requirements.
- **Don’t go it alone.**<sup>4</sup> Find other people (and organizations) in your community who share your specific policy goals. Work with them to establish a critical mass of support that will capture the attention of policymakers. Also identify any organizations or groups that might oppose your efforts; take time to address their concerns or be prepared to counter their arguments.
- **Be selective.**<sup>8</sup> Policymakers have unique responsibilities, authorities, interests, and, in some cases, voting records. Do your background research and identify those policymakers most relevant to the topic you wish to address. Your goals should guide who you work with. For example, if you want to change county ordinances around the density of vaping retail outlets, you will want to work

### **Advocacy vs. Lobbying**

It is important for prevention professionals to understand the distinction between advocacy and lobbying.

**Advocacy** is a process to raise awareness and support for social or organizational change.<sup>5</sup> It often includes education about why and how an issue is important, as well as what evidence-based solutions exist to address it. Advocacy is a key component of collaboration with policymakers. It is one of the primary means of informing them about your needs and goals.

Advocacy is not lobbying.

**Lobbying** involves taking a stance on specific legislation and encouraging elected officials to support or oppose it.<sup>6</sup> There are many financial and regulatory restrictions related to lobbying. Prevention stakeholders should take care to distinguish between the two. Federal grantees may not use any grant funds for lobbying activities<sup>1</sup> and nonprofit organizations risk losing their 501©(3) status if a “substantial part” of their activities involve lobbying.<sup>7</sup>

with the county board of supervisors, not a federal regulatory agency.

- **Know your issues “inside and out.”**<sup>9</sup> Research any relevant context or history, and how the issues impact various populations in the community, particularly those groups that have been historically marginalized. Be prepared to respond to questions and counterarguments.

## As You Get Started

When you begin to meet with policymakers, make sure you have a clear understanding of how you want the meeting to go and your desired next steps.

- **Develop and practice an ‘elevator pitch.’**<sup>10</sup> This is your “ask” — your five minutes to grab the policymaker’s attention and describe what you need from them. Elevator pitches are your foot in the door—the first step in a hopefully long and fruitful relationship.
- **Create short and compelling handouts to leave behind** (such as factsheets or infographics) that summarize your key talking points.<sup>11</sup> Share them in meetings and at events. Offer to provide additional copies that policymakers can share with others.
- **Be professional, courteous, and brief.**<sup>12</sup> Make your points respectfully and concisely. Listen attentively and don’t dismiss concerns. Pay attention to everyone in attendance—including policymakers’ staff. Staff play a core role in decision-making and often provide recommendations to officials.
- **Invite policymakers to prevention events.**<sup>13</sup> This allows policymakers to see your work in action and connect with their constituents and other community partners. Make sure the event runs smoothly and have a clear plan for how the policymaker will be involved. Take photos and post them to social media.
- **Decide what success looks like.**<sup>14</sup> It may take a long time, with numerous attempts, to see your policy goals realized. So, think incremental. Acknowledge and track short-term successes, such as the number of times you meet with policymakers, the number of community events they attend, or even how many positive and friendly relationships you developed with them.

## **Remember!**

Working with policymakers requires an understanding of specialized rules and concepts but the benefits are significant. Policies can have far-reaching effects, be relatively inexpensive and easy to sustain, and lead to substantial reductions in substance misuse—especially when consistent with other prevention strategies. Knowing when policy strategies are most appropriate, and how collaborating with policymakers is the same (and different!) from other prevention partners, will help to ensure that your policy efforts are successful.

## **RESOURCES**

The resources listed below were developed by organizations that routinely engage in collaboration with policymakers. Though most are not focused on behavioral health directly, their guidance is relevant. This list is not comprehensive, and inclusion below is not an endorsement of any specific position or effort.

### **Community Toolbox: Advocating for Change**

*University of Kansas*

Provides guidance for collaborating with policymaking via advocacy efforts. Part of the Community Toolbox series of resources to support community engagement and organizing.

### **Hosting a Site Visit for a Decisionmaker**

*National Parent Teacher Association*

Provides guidance on hosting policymakers at your offices or service delivery locations.

### **Resources for Prevention Advocacy**

*Prevention Action Alliance*

A repository of factsheets and tools for supporting substance use prevention-related advocacy.

### **State Advocacy Toolkit**

*American Dental Education Association*

Provides guidance on developing relationships and collaborating with state legislators.

### **Successful Meetings with Legislators**

*National Health Care for the Homeless Council*

Provides guidance on conducting meetings with legislators.

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