

## Communications Planning Guide for Local Health Departments

Local health departments provide essential services to the community; yet their good work often goes unnoticed and underfunded. While the public may value prevention and other public health activities, they may not connect this work with local health departments. Through effective communications, local health departments can better position themselves as trusted community leaders that provide services that are relevant and uniquely able to meet community needs. Effective communications begins with planning.

### Purpose and Use of This Guide

The resources that local health departments (LHDs) have available to develop, implement, and evaluate communications plans vary widely based on staffing, experience, and organizational priorities. This guide is designed for LHD staff who are tasked with communicating specific messages to the public or segments of the public. It provides a basic framework to use, including considerations for evaluation.

This document also includes questions to consider when developing communications. It includes considerations for how local health departments can incorporate health equity, social justice, and accessibility considerations, including health literacy, into their work. Additional [information on health equity and social justice](#) can be found on NACCHO's website along with [policy statements](#) on health and disability, health equity and social justice, immigrant health, LGBTQ+ health, mass incarceration and structural racism, stigma and women's health.

Local health departments working towards accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board may find the information in this document useful in measures across all domains in the [Standards & Measures for Initial Accreditation, Version 2022](#).

This guide was developed by communications professionals from local health departments who are members of NACCHO's Public Health Communications Workgroup (2023-2024).



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## Communications Planning Steps



### Step 1: Establish goals and objectives.

**Key question: What do you want people to know or do?**

When designing a communications plan, begin with the goals in mind. Start from a broad, “big idea” perspective and make refinements with more detail about your goals, audience, and intended impact as you move to objectives and action steps. Consider the following as you develop your goals and objectives.

- Determine how communications goals will align with the strategic goals of your health department.
- Define what key information, practices, or recommendations related to the public health issue are important for your specific audience to know.
- Build a team of experts with knowledge of the topic and potential audiences. This may include community stakeholders (nothing about us without us).
- Consider health equity in establishing these goals.
- Ensure your goals and objectives are in alignment with and acknowledge the social determinants of the public health issue you seek to address. For example, a communications plan that encourages people to “eat healthy foods” may have limited public health utility and impact if the communities you are trying to reach have food deserts that make access to healthy food inconvenient, expensive, and sometimes impossible.
- Include any relevant data and sources to support the need for the goals and objectives. For example, community health needs assessments, youth assessments, and census data could prove useful.



### Step 2: Define audience and stakeholders.

**Key questions: Who are you communicating with? Who are you trying to reach?**

- Describe stakeholders in appropriate and accurate ways. Use inclusive, person-centered language. Avoid stigmatizing words and phrases.
- Consider population-level data to help inform your audience analysis.
- Consider literacy level, accessibility, and language considerations.
- Consider what actions are feasible for your audience to take and what barriers they might have.
- Describe where and how stakeholders receive information.
- Identify community partners who could be a part of your plan.
- Identify trusted messengers within your community.

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## Step 3: Identify communications tactics that will reach and engage your audience and stakeholders.

**Key questions:** What information do you want to communicate? How and when will you communicate it? Who will do it? How much will it cost? Remember to keep your audience in mind.

- Determine your key messages.
- Consider how those messages will be delivered (e.g., video, graphics, public service announcements, press releases, interviews, community presentations, fact sheets).
- Identify the appropriate channels you will use to communicate your messages (e.g., web content, social media posts, earned media, internal communication channels, paid advertising, email communication, events).
- Consider translating collateral materials into languages as appropriate to reach community members and other stakeholders.
- Determine the start date and length of your campaign.
- Work within the allocated resources, including staff and financial resources.



## Step 4: Determine what success looks like and how you will measure it.

**Key questions:** How do you know you've met your goals? Did it work?

- Determine the types of evaluation methods you will use. Examples of outcome measurements could include surveys, web and social media analytics, metrics from content delivery platforms, advertising reach, event attendance/program participation, and other data collection.
- Measure meaningful outcomes that are aligned with the local health department's strategic plan or organizational goals. For example, did event attendance increase, call volume change, service referrals increase?
- Incorporate multiple measurement points to get a more holistic understanding of program impact. Industry standards around email conversion, frequency, and impressions are important to consider as you develop each type of communications tactic.



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## Additional Resources

### Health Equity in Communications

[According to the CDC](#), health equity is “the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health.” Health equity should be embedded as a lens and as a practice within essential public health services, including the development, dissemination, and assessment of communications. Just as there is no “one size fits all” for communications, appropriately including health equity in communications projects requires local, responsive, and nuanced approaches.

#### Resources:

- [CDC, Office of Health Equity](#)
- [New York State Department of Health, Office of Health Equity and Human Rights](#)

### PHAB Requirements

The [Public Health Accreditation Board](#) (PHAB) requires that [accredited](#) health departments maintain a risk communications plan and have a process for urgent 24/7 communications with response partners. According to PHAB, the risk communications plan must:

- Describe the process used to develop accurate and timely messages.
- Include specific information about who approves messages before distribution, and make sure those individuals know their role in the process. Determine how message approval is expedited during an emergency beforehand.
- Define and detail the audience and stakeholders, and describe methods to communicate necessary information to the entire community, including subpopulations who are at higher risk. See Steps 2 and 3 herein.
- Describe the process to coordinate the development and communication of messages among partners during an emergency.
- Describe how you will monitor for, identify, and address misconceptions, misinformation, disinformation, and gaps in information.
- Describe how information will be disseminated in the case of communication technology disruption.
- Describe the process for managing and responding to inquiries from the public during an emergency.
- Ensure there is a way for public feedback to be communicated up the chain of command. If a lot of people have the same question, a timely, direct, and public response helps everyone.
- Create a list with media and trusted community partner contact information and update it regularly. Print hard copies.
- Communicate appropriate LHD contacts to media and community partners.

### Communications Plan Examples

- [EPA: Air Quality Management Process, Communications Plan Template](#)
- [City of Modesto, CA: Communications Plan](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Health: Drinking Water Safety Toolkit](#)



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## Communications Planning Resources

- [Public Health Communications Collaborative one-page resource](#) on refining communications process, outreach, and content.
- [CDC's Health Communications Playbook](#) includes resources and worksheets to help create and launch individual tactics.

## Disclaimer

The Department of Health and Human Services' [Making Health Communication Programs Work](#) document suggests if you have limited funding or staff resources and cannot create a communications plan on your own, then you should consider:

- Working with partners who can add their resources to your own.
- Conducting activities on a smaller scale.
- Using volunteer assistance.
- Seeking out existing information and approaches developed by programs that have addressed similar issues to reduce developmental costs.

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