

## **Customizing a Template**

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Congratulations! Your local health department or community-based program may have just received a national award or grant. Assuming you'll want to share the good news of your achievement, the organization awarding the recognition may provide a template press release to help you announce the award to the local media, community partners, and the public.

Press release templates typically contain a detailed description of the program, information about the national organization making the award, and include several areas to insert specific details about the health department and the local program. Once you have filled in the program details and inserted a quote from the health officer or program director, you will have a complete press release that is ready to go to local reporters.

To get the recognition your local health department or program deserves, please take the following actions:

### **Identify LHD Communications Staff**

If you are unsure who is responsible for communications and media relation activities in your local health department, talk with your boss. Once you identify who is responsible, initiate a conversation with that person about announcing the award or grant to the local media. He or she should have access to a list of relevant reporters and the means to distribute a press release directly. If so, all you may have to do is email the completed release to that person and they will distribute it appropriately. Follow up to make sure they have done so.

### **No LHD Communications Staff? Do It Yourself**

If no one in your agency is directly responsible for media relations, it is something that you or a colleague can easily handle. Issuing a press release is as simple as creating a mailing list of reporters—preferably email addresses—and sending it to them.

### **Create a Media List**

Use the Internet to identify reporters who cover topics like public health, prevention and wellness at your local daily or weekly newspaper, as well as the primary radio and TV stations in your community. If you are not able to find an email address for a health producer at a radio or TV station, make a quick phone

call to their news desk. You may already know who many of these reporters are because they have covered your program or issue area in the past.

## Send Out the Finished Release

Once you have compiled a list of reporters and their contact information, send out the press release. Be sure to include your own contact information on the release in case a reporter wants to follow up for a story. Try to issue the release on the same day or at least within 1–2 days of when the award, grant, or program will be announced nationally. Timeliness is very important in the news business.

## Follow Up

After you've sent the release, feel free to follow up with reporters by email or phone to ensure they received the release, and to ask if they plan to run it or if they have any questions. Keep copies of any news clips that run as a result. You can often locate these items on the media outlet's website. News clips are very helpful to have as background information when explaining your program to stakeholders.

## Share with Partners

You may also want to send the press release to key community stakeholders, including policy makers, program partners, relevant care providers, and other government agencies. Regular communication and reporting progress to partners, even in the absence of a crisis or change in direction, lays the foundation for calling on those relationships for support and assistance at key moments.

## Developing an Op Ed

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The opinion editorial, or op-ed, is a powerful vehicle to express an opinion on issues related to your community. Op-eds are more effective than letters to the editor because the length allows greater detail and content control. You might use an op-ed to do the following:

- ❖ Applaud a new program that advances your mission and goals.
- ❖ Respond to published reports released on the healthiest cities and comment on why your city is or is not on the list.
- ❖ Recognize national observance days or months, such as National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and highlight how your local health department's efforts are helping reach the goals behind these celebrations or events.

- ❖ Recommend or support a public policy or a proposed initiative that you believe will have a positive impact.

Prior to writing an op-ed, be prepared to answer all the following questions:

- ❖ What is the main opinion or argument you will express?
- ❖ How does it fit with the messages in the strategic communications plan?
- ❖ What is the problem in the community that your organization is solving?
- ❖ How does your organization help to solve this problem?
- ❖ Describe your organization. How does it work?
- ❖ Why was the problem not solved before? What was the obstacle?
- ❖ Is there a villain in the story?
- ❖ What is the cost of the solution you propose?
- ❖ How can you "paint a picture" in someone's mind through your words?
- ❖ Which community leaders, groups, or people in the community agree with you? Why?
- ❖ Which community leaders, groups, or people in the community disagree with you? Why?
- ❖ What is the urgency?
- ❖ Who does this affect?
- ❖ What is the history of this story? What has been done before? What was the process to get to this point? Was there a cliffhanger or suspenseful event?
- ❖ What correlating facts support the story and strengthen the case?
- ❖ What happens next?

## General Guidelines

Whenever possible, draw on materials you have already created to generate content for op-eds and other media tools or follow these basic steps to format a new one:

- ❖ Op-eds are typically 800 words or less in length. Before writing an op-ed, contact the op-ed page editor of your local paper for submission policies and guidelines.
- ❖ Have an opinion and state it forcefully. An op-ed should argue a point, and the point being made should be stated clearly up front. A compelling hook generates interest and demonstrates relevance to the readers and the community.

- ❖ State your opinion at the outset and then back it up with facts. Do not present the facts first and save your opinion for the conclusion.
- ❖ Support your case with facts. Attribute your facts to a credible source (e.g., the Surgeon General or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- ❖ Submit a timely piece. It should relate to something in the news.
- ❖ Tell a story to your target audience using plain language that everyone can understand. Do not use industry-speak or jargon.
- ❖ Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- ❖ Offer specific recommendations to address the issues raised.