



## Making the Case for Local Public Health

### *An Op-Ed Toolkit for Local Health Department HIV, STI, & Viral Hepatitis Programs*

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) developed this toolkit to help local health departments (LHDs) demonstrate the value and impact of their work to stakeholders, including policymakers and the public, through op-eds. This resource includes tips for getting started, a sample op-ed, and recommendations for tailoring messages based on local needs, trends, and priorities.

The sample op-ed focuses on the impact of budget cuts on local HIV, STI, and hepatitis programs and related health outcomes in the community however, the tips and recommendations included in this guide can be applied to other priorities and used in other forms of communication.

### **Getting Started**

It is important that you review the submission guidelines for the news outlet(s) you are writing for, which will provide information on the word count (op-eds typically range from 400 to 1,200 words) and writing style, among other details. After reviewing the submission guidelines, you should determine:

1. **Your hook.** This is what makes the op-ed timely and grabs the attention of readers and the newspaper editor (who decides whether to publish your piece). You may tie your op-ed to a local or national news story, an anniversary or national awareness day, or the release of a new study or report. You may also create news (e.g., sharing a personal or local story that demonstrates the importance of the issue).
2. **Your goal or ask.** What do you want to achieve with this op-ed? Common goals may include raising awareness, building support or mobilizing the community, or changing the public narrative—the way your community sees an issue. You can pick a broad goal—such as generating good press for the health department—however, the more specific the goal, the easier it may be to write a strong, moving op-ed. If you're having trouble identifying a goal, think about your health department's priorities and community's needs. For example, are you experiencing an outbreak and trying to encourage people to get vaccinated for hepatitis A? Or do you want to build support for a syringe services program?
3. **Your audience.** While op-eds, particularly in local newspapers, have a broad audience that is reflective of the general public, you may want to consider your goal and determine if there are certain people or groups you want to influence. For example, you may want to craft an op-ed that targets local policymakers or one that resonates with parents.
4. **Your key messages.** Once you've identified the goal for your op-ed, identify 2-3 key messages that support your goal. What do you want readers to take away from the op-ed? These are important to determine in advance, as they should shape the entire piece and inform the stories you tell, examples you provide, data you include, and how you open and close the op-ed.

## Sample Op-Ed and Suggestions for Customization

The sample text below is intended to help guide and inform the development of your op-ed, and it could also be used to frame a similar communication format, such as a letter to the editor or blog. For the purpose of this sample op-ed, we selected STIs and specifically congenital syphilis as our focus, and we wrote from the perspective of the hypothetical “NACCHOverille Health Department” in NACCHOverille City, NACCHOverille County, USA. However, you should focus on the issue that best meets the goal of your op-ed.

### Funding Cuts Leave NACCHOverille Residents—and Babies—Vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Infections

Communities across the United States are facing rising rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including a resurgence in congenital syphilis—syphilis transmitted from parent to fetus during pregnancy—and NACCHOverille is no exception. NACCHOverille Health Department (NHD) is on the frontlines of the STI crisis, promoting and protecting the health and safety of our community. At the same time, we, like many health departments across the country, are also experiencing funding cuts that impact our ability to effectively respond. This puts NACCHOverille residents, including newborn babies, at risk.

At NHD, we have been working for more than 25 years to provide STI prevention and treatment services in our county. In 2019, we provided affordable, high-quality STI services to more than 800 NACCHOverille residents.

Nationally, rates of syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia have reached 20-year highs, and cases of congenital syphilis have doubled since 2013. In NACCHOverille, our STI rates rose 12 percent last year, including a 16 percent increase in syphilis. We also saw our first cases of congenital syphilis in years. The rise in STIs has disproportionately impacted NACCHOverille youth, who accounted for more than half of cases diagnosed in 2019. While increases have been seen across the county, cities in eastern NACCHOverille have been hardest hit.

#### Introduction

Make sure to start and end with your key messages and highlight your hook in the opening paragraph.

Next, connect the hook to the work of the health department. Start with a brief overview, as you will have the opportunity to provide more specifics about your work after you’ve provided further details on the issue and local trends.

Once you have your audience’s attention and you’ve introduced the issue(s) (e.g., HIV, STI, and/or viral hepatitis), take a deeper dive into local trends. Consider highlighting information (quantitative or qualitative) on disparities and/or populations in your community most impacted by the issue that you are highlighting.

Despite our critical role in battling rising rates of STIs and fighting cases of congenital syphilis, local health departments have faced stagnant and declining budgets for nearly a decade, and in 2017, a National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) survey found that [one-third](#) anticipate budget cuts in the next fiscal year. **At NHD, we've experienced declining budgets for nearly a decade and have had to reduce our clinic hours and turn patients away. We've also had to cut down on our outreach efforts, which have been critical to reaching residents of eastern NACCHOville, far from NHD's location in downtown NACCHOville City.** This insufficient funding, coupled with increasing STI rates, has impacted our ability to respond effectively to the STI crisis and protect the health of NACCHOville residents.

Local health departments are the first line of defense in protecting our communities against persistent and emerging diseases and health challenges. As our nation faces skyrocketing STI rates, **we must ensure that local public health has the resources to address these issues and protect our community.**

### Conclusion

Make sure to **reiterate your key message(s)** and connect them to what you've shared in the op-ed, including the deep dive into the issue(s) and the role your health department plays in addressing the issue(s).

### Support the connection to your health department by explicitly describing how your health department addresses the issue.

Often the day-to-day work of public health, especially prevention, is hidden from the public. Make the connection between your work and how it impacts your community. Consider providing specific information about the impact of budget cuts on your health department (e.g., having to reduce hours or turn patients away at STI clinics, increased workload for DIS, reducing or eliminating outreach efforts). If you have not experienced budget cuts, describe how current trends (e.g., rising STI rates) have impacted your health department and the importance of maintaining or expanding programs and services to address these evolving needs.

### If you're focusing on more than one issue, make sure to draw connections between the issues.

For example, if you're focusing on the impact of the opioid epidemic on the spread of infectious diseases, you could say: *Hepatitis B and C and HIV can be spread through injection drug use, and consequently the opioid epidemic has been accompanied by a rise in cases of these infectious diseases. Between 2010 and 2016, national rates of acute hepatitis C infections more than [tripled](#), and according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [NACCHOville is vulnerable to an outbreak of HIV or hepatitis C among persons who inject drugs](#)*

Or, if you're trying to explain how HIV funding cuts impact your STI program, you could say: *HIV funding is critical to our efforts to respond to the STI crisis. HIV is transmitted through the same behaviors that spread other STIs, and both HIV and other STIs disproportionately impact young people, people of color, and LGBTQ people. STIs also increase the body's [risk of transmitting or acquiring HIV](#), and thus rising STI rates may threaten the progress we've made against HIV.*

## **Additional Resources**

For additional resources on how to communicate about and advocate for local public health, check out NACCHO's policy statements and letters: <https://www.naccho.org/advocacy/activities>.

Additionally, see below examples of op-eds about local public health and/or authored by LHDs:

- Orlando Sentinel: [4 public-health steps to end the cycle of violence](#)
- The Hill: [Our people are dying from the opioid epidemic — we need emergency funding](#)
- Montana Standard: [The Public's Health: Strategic plan to focus on main needs based on assessment](#)
- The Hill: [Chicago health commissioner: The ACA saves lives and we shouldn't abandon it](#)
- The Seattle Times: [Get real about minimizing risk of future Zika and Ebola cases](#)
- The Hill: [To end HIV/AIDS, cities like ours are leading the way by setting bold goals](#)

Please contact Kat Kelley, Program Analyst, HIV, STI, & Viral Hepatitis, at [kkelley@naccho.org](mailto:kkelley@naccho.org) or 202-507-4223 with any questions about this toolkit.