
DOCUMENT THE PROBLEM: Overview

Link the Problem to Decision Makers

Most tobacco use prevention materials make an effort to document a problem, but sometimes, facts and information are used without considering the intended purpose of the information. National statistics may be used that have little relevance to a local community.

Use Local Information

To document a local problem or issue you need data, such as:

- illegal sales rates within city boundaries
- which local district has the highest illegal sales rate
- demographic information about the communities and neighborhoods where illegal sales is a problem

To capture the attention of local decision makers, it is necessary to document the extent of the problem by using local data.

It is important to be able to compare local data with city, county, state and national data, but statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) will not move a member of the city council who is in opposition. Local data are what influence policy and decision makers and improve the chance of interesting local media.

Decide early on which information is needed to document the problem. This decision will be influenced by who is the target of the campaign, the makeup of the campaign coalition, and who or what you want as allies. For example, if you determined that a particular city council member is blocking a licensing policy, the best information might be youth purchase and “sting” data from that council district.

Merely documenting a national, statewide or even a county tobacco problem does not automatically make local officials feel responsible for the problem. To produce a solution, you must make them aware of the problem and their responsibility. Then present them with an opportunity to do something about it. Political officials can be prodded to take responsibility if you uncover evidence that they knew about the problem and refused to act, or that they passed a policy but refused to enforce it.

To make teen smoking the responsibility of local officials, you need to take the research and investigation deeper and deeper into the community, extracting tobacco sales and use information first from counties and cities, and then from supervisorial and council districts, and then deeper yet, from identifiable neighborhoods. In this way, you develop information that reflects on the performance of the targeted decision maker. As a side benefit, it brings along its own constituency of concern. If, for example, your investigation uncovers higher than av-

erage illegal sales and teen smoking in the African American neighborhoods of the fourth city council district, you have information that carries a punch. Now the campaign has an impetus for parents to attend meetings with council members from that district.

To continue this example, the information about illegal sales in the African American community may expose the council member to criticism from churches within the community. These churches are part of the council member's political support base and these neighborhoods vote. If other community leaders learn of the problem, they may demand that something be done. Now the situation is ripe for change. It is possible to move the council member into the "support" column for the proposed policy. Compare it to a campaign that presented city and statewide information with no local data and no data by council districts. No one is on the spot. No one is asking questions. It is the difference between elevator music and rap, it is background information versus information with attitude and an action agenda. With one you can wield serious influence; with the other, you can simply educate the community.

Generating such localized health data, tobacco-use statistics and illegal sales and marketing data are not easy. Existing data are rarely localized in this manner. Ideally, you would conduct surveys to produce and report on findings and distinguish them by council or supervisorial district. To do this you need an adequate sample size to produce reliable results.

The need to localize information applies to every aspect of your effort to document the problem. Lurking right behind the public health issue of illegal sales, for example, is the issue of lax enforcement of existing laws. Behind that there is the question of competition between public health concerns and local business interests. Public health data and the other information you collect become more politically potent if it is localized and linked to the political geography of the community including political districts and neighborhoods.

In addition to public health data, the leadership group needs to collect and evaluate information about the political will of the community and its elected officials to deal with tobacco issues. What is the political environment for tobacco policy change? In documenting the problem, there are really two things to investigate: the public health problem and the political environment.

The Public Health Problem

Your campaign committee may not need to explore in depth every possible public health issue prior to selecting a campaign. The coalition may have already identified its policy goals through the Communities of Excellence needs assessment and in doing so, narrowed the field to a particular policy or enforcement intervention. The sections focusing on documenting the public health problem include:

- [Document the Problem: Youth Tobacco Use](#)
- [Document the Problem: Illegal Sales](#)
- [Document the Problem: Store Marketing](#)
- [Document the Problem: Enforcement](#)
- [Document the Problem: Merchant Education](#)

The Political Environment

All aspects of the political environment must be investigated, no matter which public health issue is selected. It is the investigation of the political environment that tells us how easy or difficult it will be to win the desired policy and how to build an effective strategy to pursue it.

Think about the kinds of questions that will come up in a group discussion about whether to go for a licensing policy. What other tobacco control ordinances has the council passed? What are the attitudes among community leaders about regulating local retailers? Who would have to enforce such an ordinance? What are the attitudes of the mayor and council members to such an idea? Would the local paper endorse it? The answers to these questions about the political environment are as critical for the campaign as are public health data.

See [Document the Problem: Political Environment](#).

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