



Chapter 2:
The Public Policy
Landscape and
Key Partners

Introduction

To maximize your effectiveness as a proponent for sound immunization policy, it helps to make periodic assessments of the policy landscape in your state or jurisdiction. Understanding key players' roles and building relationships with them will allow you to anticipate, as well as shape, agendas where appropriate.

Chapter 1 of the *Immunization Program Policy Resource Guide* covered the federal rules and regulations that govern policy education. This chapter discusses the key players that shape the immunization policy landscape in your state, highlights the benefits of partnering with these key players, and offers suggestions for building effective relationships with them.

Why should immunization program managers work with partners?

Partnerships are important to an effective advocacy strategy. They can help you by:

- ★ Strengthening your voice, amplifying key messages, and bringing the “power of many” to your work
- ★ Enhancing your reputation and bringing additional credibility to your cause
- ★ Filling in any gaps with additional expertise and resources
- ★ Sharing perspectives that governmental public health staff may not be able to express
- ★ Building the capacity of all partners by sharing experiences, knowledge, and lessons learned

REMINDER! Know Your Role

Chapter 1 of AIM's *Immunization Program Policy Resource Guide* covers the relevant rules and regulations governing advocacy, as well as why immunization program managers should be actively and appropriately involved in the policy process.

Chapter 1 also includes links to CDC guidance on allowable educational activities, including 1) nonpartisan analysis, study, or research reports; 2) examinations and discussions of broad social, economic, and similar problems in conferences and reports; and 3) information provided upon request by a legislative body or committee for technical advice and assistance.

As an additional reminder, no federal funds may be used to support any lobbying activity, and state rules vary. When in doubt, please check with your agency's legislative liaison or other leadership to ensure your policy engagement is fully in compliance with all applicable rules.

Which key players make ideal partners?

Public Sector Partners

Legislative Liaison

Perhaps the best in-house resource to help you navigate your role in public policy development is your state or local health agency's designated legislative liaison. This individual often serves on the department's leadership team, although in some states, this person may be posted in your governor's office. The liaison is usually the central point of contact for all of the department's interactions with state and federal legislators. They are responsible for advocating for the department's agenda as well as responding to inquiries from the legislative branch.

Legislative liaisons are often the first to receive inquiries from legislators or governors' offices and therefore need your assistance in formulating rapid responses to time-sensitive questions. Liaisons are also typically charged with leading your department's analysis of proposed legislation, formulating department positions, and supporting key department staff in testifying before the legislature when requested. They can help you understand any additional state rules that govern your interactions with policymakers.

Legislative liaisons can also provide insight into the culture of the state agency when it comes to legislative issues. For example, some states embrace wide-ranging debate and allow latitude for staff to express professional opinions while others centralize decision-making. While all agencies expect senior staff to support agency positions once adopted, there is sometimes wide latitude in how agencies conduct internal deliberations and whether they allow open public discussion. It is important for you to observe your colleagues and ask about your department's approach to policy development.

Establishing a solid relationship with your agency's designated liaison is critical for ensuring immunization policy priorities are understood and promoted. By making sure your liaison has the latest information about your program's needs, challenges, and successes, you can ensure they are equipped to help you effectively educate policymakers.

Proactively briefing liaisons on suspected outbreaks, vaccine shortages, potential controversies, and organized or emerging opposition can help prevent them from being caught off-guard in daily interactions and responsibilities. Particularly in states that limit or prohibit staff interaction with elected officials, it is imperative that your designated liaison is fully informed and supported so they can effectively carry your key messages for you.

For public health to implement efforts to reduce disparities and improve vaccination coverage among all communities, we must reach out to trusted community partners.

— Amy Pisani, *Vaccinate Your Family*

Governors and Their Staff

Governors are the chiefs of each state's executive branch and therefore have primacy in setting the state health agency's policy agenda and formulating annual budget requests for programs and entire departments. It is well-advised to become familiar with your governor's priorities and any public positions taken on vaccine policy prior to taking office.

Is the governor a parent who has experience with vaccinating their own children? Who are the governor's biggest supporters and contributors? What are the health policy priorities of the governor's spouse? Recall that Vaccinate Your Family: The Next Generation of Every Child by Two (VYF) was founded in 1991 by Rosalynn Carter and Betty Bumpers, whose immunization partnership began as First Ladies of Georgia and Arkansas, respectively. After founding VYF, they traveled to every state in the nation to build coalitions and engage governors' spouses on the issue of immunization, and later supported immunization information system (IIS) efforts. Knowing your governor's background and exposure to immunization policy is crucial for anticipating possible new policy directives and identifying where targeted outreach and education may be beneficial.

The governor's staff can also have a sizable influence in conveying priorities to your state's health agency and health system. Knowing the governor's priorities and establishing staff relationships where feasible can demonstrate your value as advisors and issue experts. Identifying and reaching out to your governor's chief health policy advisor in coordination with your department's legislative liaison is critical for ensuring coordination.

State Health Officers

State health officers—often referred to as SHOs—serve as the head of a state's public health agency or division. They are often appointed by the governor or sometimes selected by the governor's appointed cabinet health secretary. The SHO will generally be expected to implement the governor's public health priorities and—with the support of your agency's legislative liaison—will often be the primary

spokesperson for the agency before the state legislature, federal congressional delegation, and the media.

These positions tend to turn over often, with an average tenure of one year, so it is prudent to anticipate the need to routinely brief a new boss on your program's priorities, needs, and successes. Learning about your SHO's background and experience with immunization policy can help you quickly assess how to adapt your briefings and best prepare them to represent your program in these and other important venues.

Other State Programs and Agencies

Your state Maternal and Child Health; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Medicaid; and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) programs all play critical roles in supporting the system of services needed to support high immunization coverage. Meeting regularly with your counterparts in these programs can support coordination and help identify gaps in the current system. Each program may have needs assessment findings, performance measures, or other data that can help inform policy efforts. They may also have political intelligence on working effectively as state employees with policymakers and cultivating potential champions for your issues.

WIC

A Presidential mandate signed by President Bill Clinton in December 2000 orders all WIC agencies to assess children's immunization status during certification visits and offer referrals to those in need of vaccination. This is an unfunded mandate, but when surveyed by VYF and AIM in 2015, WIC local offices showed an overwhelming level of support for the important role of these visits in ensuring that the nearly 50 percent of U.S. children up to age five (and pregnant women) who receive WIC support are also protected from deadly vaccine-preventable diseases.

Each year, VYF and CDC provide an immunization update via webinar. In 2020, WIC recipients will have access to a mobile update that will offer vaccination information via the USDA/WIC program. It is essential that public health also offer support to local WIC staff to ensure that they are up-to-date on vaccine science and have current lists of local providers willing to accept low-income patients and/or health department resources.

Local Health Agencies

The network of local health departments in your state likely represents the front line of the public immunization infrastructure. These agencies are also likely represented in the policy arena by a state association of local health

agencies, as well as in Washington via the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO). Tapping into their experience and network of contacts can extend and complement key messages and bring a local perspective, which is valued by policymakers following the maxim that “all politics is local.”

Federally Qualified Health Centers

Community health centers are also key partners by virtue of their location in medically underserved areas and mission to treat all regardless of ability to pay. They are also organized via a State Primary Care Association that will usually have strong advocacy capabilities.

Schools, Day Care Centers, Teachers, and School Nurses

Because of the importance of school-entry vaccination laws, school administrators and teachers make natural partners in advocating for optimal immunization policy. These groups are also on the frontlines of the debate over exemptions, so close coordination can be critical in understanding community dynamics and finding common ground solutions.

School systems may receive funding based on student attendance, so reducing absenteeism is a strong shared goal. However, in some instances, superintendents may be reluctant to ban students due to the reflection it can have on participation rate incentives. It is important to understand the incentives and disincentives they are confronting, including promotion of teachers' wellness. Science and health education teachers, as well as school nurses, can be particularly helpful allies. We should also not overlook the role of teachers' unions and in-home day care centers. Associations representing school administrators, health teachers, and school nurses can all be strong allies.

Private Sector Partners

State and Local Immunizations Coalitions

In addition to being critical partners in advocating for policies that support vaccination, state and local coalitions help protect people of all ages from vaccine-preventable diseases by:

- ★ Raising awareness of the critical need for timely immunizations
- ★ Increasing the public's understanding of the benefits of vaccines
- ★ Increasing confidence in the safety of vaccines
- ★ Ensuring that all families have access to lifesaving vaccines

Many coalitions work to increase immunization rates and prevent disease by creating and distributing educational

materials for healthcare professionals and the public that enhance the delivery of safe and effective immunization services. Coalitions are often trusted voices that can facilitate and amplify communication about the safety, efficacy, and use of vaccines with key audiences, including patients, parents, healthcare organizations, and government health agencies.

Many states and localities already have thriving coalitions that bring together many of these partners to promote vaccines. Coalitions often organize and engage in advocacy work, although it is important to remember the prohibitions against using any federal grant funds to support any lobbying activity (as covered in chapter 1). You will also want to consider any state rules or regulations that govern how you as a state employee engage in any coalition work that could be considered lobbying. Some states may allow you to be part of the coalition to serve as a resource but might restrict you from either urging them to take specific policy actions or participating in any direct lobbying. Again, your state's legislative liaison can provide guidance on allowable activities.

If your state or locality doesn't already have a coalition, you may want to consider forming one. The National Network of Immunization Coalitions provides support and multiple channels for communication among local, state, regional, national, and international immunization coalitions, and is an excellent resource for learning more. If you do have a coalition, you may want to assess for opportunities to engage additional types of partners.

The Public

The voices and stories of the people who are impacted by your programs can have an enormous impact on policy decisions. Legislators can relate much better to personal stories than a wealth of public health data. Having a repository of stories from individuals who benefit from your program can help reach legislators in ways that data alone cannot.

Several organizations have collected stories that you may want to consider utilizing or emulating as models for your own jurisdictions. Groups representing individuals who are immunocompromised or at heightened risk for infection will also be natural allies. The National Consumer League is traditionally very interested in the subject of immunizations as well.

Health Professionals and Their Organizations

Health professionals have a great deal of credibility within the legislative process and often have established lobbying capacity at the state and federal levels. A Gallup poll found that nurses, medical doctors, and pharmacists are among the most trusted professions in American society.

STORIES ON THE VALUE OF IMMUNIZATION

American Academy of Pediatrics.

[Why I Vaccinate: Parent Testimonials](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[Fact Sheet](#), "Reasons to Vaccinate".

Children's Hospital of Philadelphia has a collection of personal stories [here](#).

Families Fighting Flu has collected numerous emotional family stories recounting how lives have been permanently altered by flu [here](#).

Immunize.org maintains "Unprotected People." These stories are an online collection of more than 100 personal accounts and case reports about vaccine-preventable diseases [here](#). They also feature numerous personal testimonies [here](#).

National Foundation for Infectious Diseases has a collection called "Real People, Real Stories" that are "real-life stories provide a sobering reminder about the dangers of remaining unvaccinated." Available [here](#)

National Meningitis Association has several volunteers who have all been personally affected by meningococcal disease. They note their "hope that by sharing our personal experiences, others will learn about the dangers of meningococcal disease and have the opportunity to make informed decisions about immunization." Stories available [here](#).

Vaccinate Your Family has many stories from "vaccine advocates who are willing to share their painful stories in hopes of saving the lives of people of all ages" [here](#).

Voices for Vaccines. A gallery of brief first-person testimonials answering the question "Why I choose to vaccinate" is [here](#).

For access to linked resources, please reference this guide online at immunizationmanagers.org/policytoolkit

Working closely with your state and local medical societies—nursing, hospital, pharmacy associations—and other clinical organizations can create effective alliances and provide elected officials with information from highly trusted sources. Medical societies can also help you identify and deploy effective spokespeople when needed.

Community-Based Organizations

Like local health agencies, your state or jurisdiction's network of community-based organizations—particularly those in the health and human services and youth-service sectors—can be critical partners for amplifying the needs and successes of immunization programs. They can also bring the local perspective that many legislators value. Finding ways to amplify these organizations' messages in conjunction with pro-vaccine messages can be a helpful way to expand your reach.

Advocacy and Voluntary Agencies

Groups like your local March of Dimes chapter, affiliates of the Children's Defense Fund, and other local groups with shared missions can also be helpful partners. These groups tend to have in-house capacity and expertise for advocacy and may even be able to connect you with grassroots supporters who can offer their support when needed.

Business Community

Businesses benefit from healthy families. However, the business community may not immediately be engaged in promoting immunization policy. As major payors in the health care system via employer-sponsored health insurance, they should be amenable to messages that focus on the cost-effectiveness of vaccines as well as the potential for reducing costs due to employee absenteeism.

Academic Institutions

Like your state medical societies, your state's academic institutions may be credible messengers to highlight the current evidence in support of vaccine policies—especially schools of public health, medicine, and nursing. Your universities will also likely have heightened awareness due to recent meningitis outbreaks and will be important partners in navigating policy to address this risk.

Tips for building policy education partnerships

- ★ **Be strategic.** Take time to identify partners whose priorities most effectively align with yours. More partners are not necessarily better than a core group of dedicated and knowledgeable advocates.
- ★ **Try to find a win-win value proposition.** Avoid approaching potential partners with the frame of how they can help your program. Instead, identify a value proposition that delivers wins for both organizations.

Examples of win-win propositions for partnering to increase immunization rates include fewer missed days of work for parent employees (for business audiences), help in meeting applicable performance measures (for health plan audiences), or fewer school disruptions (for school administrator audiences).

- ★ **Identify and cultivate potential champions within key stakeholder groups that share your vision.** Identify effective programs, associations, and other groups with similar missions. Learn about their goals and agendas and identify ways to support those goals within the context of your mission.
- ★ **Make friends before you need them.** Building relationships throughout the year—and before a crisis—will ensure that you’ve built adequate trust and understanding of your cause.
- ★ **Learn who your program detractors and opponents are and what drives them.** Then, identify strategies for responding to their concerns. Select and bookmark resources that can help to address opponents’ messages.
- ★ **Think creatively to engage non-traditional partners,** such as state real estate associations concerned with safe and healthy communities, unions that promote healthy workplaces, infant and child death review committees that have authority to make policy recommendations, and autism groups—who, if approached with sensitivity, can be strong allies.
- ★ **Form or utilize existing task forces,** advisory groups, and coalitions when appropriate to achieve specific strategic aims.

Pearls of Wisdom from Maternal and Child Health Colleagues

- ▶ **The more difficult the relationship, the more important it is to meet face-to-face.**
- ▶ **Assess what you might do differently, but do not take all difficulties personally.**
- ▶ **Some responses to your outreach may be influenced by your predecessor’s past actions or sentiments. Find out key stakeholders’ views of your programs and learn from that history.**
- ▶ **Never, ever burn your bridges!**