POLICY ADVOCACY

The evidence of the benefits of physical activity is strong but how do we get policy makers to pay attention? A recent article by Shilton outlines a process for public health practitioners for bringing this evidence to the forefront of policy agendas. Shilton notes that advocacy, defined by the World Health Organization’s as “a combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and systems support of a particular health goal or program”, is underdeveloped in the fields of health promotion and public health. Rather than an industry adversary that is the target of some other health advocacy efforts, there are many less evident and more pervasive enemies such as apathy, ignorance, political indifference, addiction to labour-saving devices and a ‘couch potato’ attitude. Assets include the strength of the evidence, opportunities for cross-community benefits and partnerships. The article presents a three step process for understanding and mobilizing physical activity advocacy.

STEP 1: THE EVIDENCE – WHY ADVOCATE FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

In the context of health promotion, gathering and translating the evidence is essential to describe:
> the contribution of physical inactivity to the prevalence, causes and prevention of diseases;
> the processes and impacts of physical activity interventions; or,
> expert knowledge.

Politicians and key decision makers may want health evidence to be complemented by information that proposed physical activity actions are acceptable with their electorate,
WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

> Construct arguments around a government’s existing policy priorities and provide to both politicians and government employees. This may include economic analyses, policy analyses and linking physical activity evidence to other community concerns, such as policy, safety or sustainability.
> Identify where intervention investments need to be made (i.e., populations where physical inactivity levels are highest).
> Promote guidelines for physical activity using language, messaging and appeals appropriate to each audience.
> Focus arguments for physical inactivity interventions on its relevance across government sectors (transport, planning, education, sport and recreation, local government and even crime prevention and tourism). Aim to increase awareness among decision makers in all of these sectors.
> Frame media physical activity messages across a diversity of public issues. Neighbourhood planning, environmental issues, obesity and community safety can all be used as opportunities to present arguments for physical activity.
> Equip professionals with arguments regarding current issues, new evidence and breaking news to ensure that the messages are consistent and well informed.

STEP 2: THE MESSAGE AND AGENDA – WHAT SHOULD BE ADVOCATED?

Successful advocacy necessitates the move from the evidence to clear and consistent messages that detail the amount and type of physical activity, and the benefits it will deliver along with a set of well-justified and prioritized actions. The message needs to not only be scientifically accurate but needs to be communicated in ways appropriate to identified target groups. Evidence is also useful in identifying advocacy targets, including policy, legislative and educational actions that will impact physical activity and grab the attention of politicians and the media.

STEP 3: THE STRATEGY – HOW SHOULD ADVOCACY BE IMPLEMENTED?

A comprehensive approach that includes multiple dimensions has the greatest chance of being effective and includes:

> Political advocacy focuses on gaining the political commitment required for policy actions and funding for campaigns and monitoring. The first step is to raise the awareness of decision makers of the importance of physical activity. This should be targeted not only at ministers of health but across multiple departments taking a whole community approach.
> Media advocacy can increase public awareness of issues and drive public opinion and sentiment, creating an important potential ally and mobilizing support for policy changes. A diversity of issues that are important to the public can include physical activity as part of the solution.
> Professional mobilization involves engaging the broad physical activity workforce to communicate physical activity messages. Coalitions of these supporters from the various sectors can be important drivers for change, mobilizing broad support and third party endorsement.
> Community mobilization involves engaging current physical activity participants and supporters, ranging from traditional sport and recreation to walking and cycling for transport and recreation, for physical activity causes.
> Advocacy from within (reorienting) organizations is a frequently overlooked element of advocacy for change. This process targets organizational structures, committee membership, funding priorities and strategic and operational processes to change the priority an organization places on physical activity.

The article presents a ten point plan summarizing a comprehensive population approach to increasing physical activity.

WHO SHOULD ADVOCATE?

The list of potential advocates is as broad as the mix of the advocacy strategy and its targets and can include non-governmental organizations, academics, government employees, champions, professionals and the public.

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