

ISSUE BRIEF | BUILDING PUBLIC WILL TO ACHIEVE ACCESS TO HEALTH

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As the passage of federal health care reform moves toward implementation, it is a critical time to provide clear, balanced information. While many polls showed that a majority of Americans supported the bill's key provisions, other polls suggested the reform measure as a whole was not necessarily receiving majority support, calling into question whether public will for health care and insurance reform truly exists.

To increase understanding about the realities of federal health care reform, as well as other state-level efforts to advance access to health, The Colorado Trust has developed a strategy to engage a variety of stakeholders and partners to build the public will of Coloradans to expand health coverage and to improve the health care system.

This brief summarizes the public will-building approach, breaking it into five phases and describing actions and experiences along the way. It also provides an example of how this strategy has helped to shape and move another complex issue – the environmental movement – over an equally long period of time.

» BUILDING PUBLIC WILL: AN OVERVIEW

Public will building results in sustained shifts in attitude and behavior, and in a lasting shift in social norms and expectations. It combines and goes beyond better promotion, more advertising, clearer communication or more partnerships to engender a shared priority and turn belief into action.

Public will building is achieved when a sufficient number of community members and thought leaders have galvanized around an issue to form a new or different set of fundamental community expectations. It does this by integrating a variety of outreach, advocacy and communication methods in a process that:

- Includes target audiences in message and strategy testing and development to ensure that the effort is highly authentic and relevant
- Connects people to issues through their existing, closely held values (security, options, opportunity, etc.), rather than trying to change people's values
- Respects cultural context, meeting people where they are, recognizing their needs and limitations and giving them appropriate ways to become involved
- Results in long-term attitudinal shifts manifested in individuals taking new or different actions – collectively, these actions create community-level and institutional change.

By engaging broad-based, grassroots support to influence individual, institutional and social change, and by developing committed champions throughout the community, public will builds long-term change over time. By contrast, many communication and advocacy campaigns (including efforts to pass federal health reform legislation) focus on short-term changes in public opinion but do little to foster sustainable change because the efforts themselves are not sustainable.

A public will building effort unfolds over time, as organizers take specific actions and audiences move along a continuum from unaware to aware to involved to committed. The five phases of public will building are depicted in the image and described below.



In each phase, we describe the action of the “organizers,” those individuals and groups working to build public will, and of the “audiences,” those being engaged in the effort.



» PHASE 1: FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Organizers: In this first phase, organizers rely on solid research to develop a clear knowledge base about the causes of the problem, the cultural context in which the problem exists and the entities that can impact the problem. From this base, organizers assess current activities and the players involved, and identify gaps in the change effort.

In addition, organizers explore the effects of the problem from economic, social, political and environmental perspectives. This research helps organizers effectively define the issue as relevant to the values of the community.

Audience: In Phase 1, there is a pioneering audience, typically the group that first becomes aware of a problem and draws a parallel between the issues and the values of the community, creating an early sense of relevance/importance for broader audiences beyond the pioneers. These pioneers then create the spark of public will as they move from low or no awareness to early awareness, and begin sharing the new information within their circles.

Note that the problem that is “discovered” by audiences in this phase is not always a brand new issue. It is often a long-standing issue that has become newly relevant due to recent events (e.g., climate change as the new environmental issue) or that is being framed in a new way to appeal to new audiences (e.g., funding for libraries as a mechanism for workforce training and job creation).



» PHASE 2: BUILDING AWARENESS

Organizers: During Phase 2, organizers identify the audience segments that can affect the issue and gather information about each segment’s level of awareness, relationship to the issue, personal values and sources of information. This helps organizers prioritize the audiences, develop effective messages and select the best channels to deliver the messages. Organizers then test the messages

with audiences for resonance and customize them, with audience involvement, so that they ultimately connect with the cultural context of each audience.

Once the message is refined, it is conveyed through a variety of grassroots-to-grasstops communication, advocacy and outreach efforts. For example, mass media creates awareness, maintains a consistent level of buzz so the issue stays on the audiences’ radar and provides environmental cues that a larger movement is gathering. And grassroots engagement connects authentically to existing values and delivers highly targeted messages.

Audience: The audience has grown from the original pioneers to include a broader circle, beginning with those most likely to act and working through subsequent groups with greater opposition or barriers to change. Audiences become ready to “own” the issue by gaining a deeper awareness and an understanding of how it relates to their core values. They are primed to become messengers themselves.

BECOMING
KNOWLEDGEABLE/
TRANSMITTING
INFORMATION
PHASE 3

» PHASE 3: SHARING INFORMATION

Organizers: During Phase 3, outreach moves from raising awareness to providing information about how change can occur and what needs to be done. Organizers focus on providing specific information about how to effect change through personal, community and institutional actions (including: mobilizing support or opposition to a policy; speaking out; voting with

one’s dollars through loyalty or boycott; and adopting new policies, practices or procedures).

Audience: Once audience members are aware of an issue and its importance, they want to know how to make a difference. They seek answers to questions, including: Who can influence the issue? What organizations are responsible and able to make a difference? What can I do? With answers to these questions, they can begin to connect their related values and awareness of the issue with knowledge of what they can do about it.

CREATING A
PERSONAL
CONVICTION
PHASE 4

» PHASE 4: CREATING A PERSONAL CONVICTION

Organizers: This phase shifts from letting people know how to act, to supporting them in taking action and becoming ambassadors themselves. Organizers deliver clear messages through an integrated grassroots and media approach, mobilizing individuals and organizations to actively champion the issue. In turn, champions and

ambassadors actively communicate with their networks. Individual commitments and changes are positioned as part of new, aspirational community expectations, illuminating the formation of a movement. Organizers encourage audiences to identify themselves as part of the movement by making pledges, endorsing core positions and inviting others to join.

Audience: This is the critical stage, where individuals make a choice (conscious or not) to own an issue and create change. This ownership goes beyond a specific election or a particular program. Personal commitment in this phase means that people understand the problem – and its root causes – and dedicate themselves to working for change through a variety of actions. The issue becomes a touchpoint in individual choice-making, influencing what people purchase and to what positions they lend or deny their support. Public will is established.

EVALUATING
WHILE
REINFORCING
PHASE 5

» PHASE 5: EVALUATING WHILE REINFORCING

Organizers: By evaluating messages, activities and results, and linking successes and failures to specific strategies, organizers can make adjustments to achieve greater impact. Unlike many public opinion-based efforts, where the key focus is solely on undecided audiences, public will organizers ensure that communication and

advocacy strategies reinforce those who have made the choice to act as well as engage new audiences, including those who are undecided. This reinforcement is

Public will-building is a POWERFUL APPROACH TO CREATING SUSTAINABLE CHANGE to ensure that access to health for all Coloradans is viewed as critical to quality of life, economic viability and educational attainment.

critical to public will building because it helps ensure that people who have taken ownership of an issue are reminded of their commitment and continue to see it as part of how they define themselves – and are active ambassadors to others.

Audience: Once individuals have taken action, they evaluate the results and become increasingly aware of the actions of others in relationship to the issue. They either confirm their decision and deepen their conviction or question their decision and make adjustments to their actions. The more they feel reinforced in their choice, the more they will take actions consistent with their conviction, which in turn helps drive change and influence others.

» PUTTING IT TOGETHER TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Public will building is a powerful approach to creating sustainable change to ensure that access to health for all Coloradans is viewed as critical to quality of life, economic viability and educational attainment. The process attracts and enlists committed champions and ambassadors who are moved to take action, and whose actions enlist and engage others. As change occurs, evaluation and reinforcement support the efforts of early adopters, converting them to ambassadors. Ultimately, this establishes a new set of normative community expectations within which our communities – and our health – can thrive.

» CASE STUDY: BUILDING PUBLIC WILL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

In seeking to build sustained public will for expanded health coverage and an improved health care system, advocates can learn a great deal from the successes – and the setbacks – experienced by the environmental movement as it sought to build public will for another complex, entrenched, emotional and partisan issue.

In the last half century, environmental awareness has evolved from an upper-class, wilderness-based ideology to a diverse and inclusive social and economic movement that has engaged millions of Americans in personal action, political activism and demand for change. Where protecting the environment was once seen as an intractable problem with little role for everyday people, it is now one of the most successful grassroots movements in history. Experts widely declared the 2000s as the decade when environmentalism went mainstream. Further, because climate change and other emerging issues continue to force the environmental movement to frame new messages and engage new champions (while working against powerful skeptics and the immensely profitable oil and gas industry), it is also an instructive example in the continual evolution of public will building.

The following is an anecdotal comparison examining how key developments fit into the public will-building mode. While this is not a thorough, sequential review of the movement or a specific look at the intentional strategy of any one organization, it nonetheless provides an instructive overview of how public will has grown and continues to evolve for an issue that has taken shape over a timeframe comparable to health care reform, and one that is equally complex.

» CASE STUDY: BUILDING PUBLIC WILL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

FRAMING
THE PROBLEM

PHASE 1

Getting things started:

- Early environmentalist Theodore Roosevelt establishes the conservation frame in 1901, focusing on resource management and private development in forming the U.S. Forest Service.
- Sierra Club founder John Muir introduces the preservation frame, viewing the land as a “fountain of life,” not a place for human consumption and promotion of industry needs. Still, environmentalism is mainly a way to preserve leisure activities for the wealthy.

Changing with the times:

- Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, illuminates the dangers of environmental pollution to human health. This begins a shift from protection of land as a pristine place for wildlife, to protection of the environment for human life.
- In the 1970s, the frame becomes more inclusive, showing benefits and risks to everyone (think of the crying Native American looking over the landscape in the first anti-pollution campaigns).
- During the past three decades, the frame has continued to evolve, making a deep connection between the environment and health, quality of life, finances, jobs and other issues that align with closely held values and current events. In December 2009, the EPA declares carbon dioxide emissions an official threat to public health.

BUILDING
AWARENESS

PHASE 2

- Throughout the 1960s and ‘70s, crisis galvanizes action. The environmental movement leverages highly visible disasters to raise awareness of the urgent need for action: 1965 power blackout and garbage strikes in New York City, 1969 burning of the Ohio River, 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, 1970s oil crisis. President Carter encourages energy conservation by turning down the heat in the White House.
- Schools begin teaching about environmental issues and sending kids home with information about recycling and other actions.
- In the 1990s, mainstream news media coverage of environmental issues increases greatly; traditional and online media dedicated to the environment proliferate and reach deeply into the general public. Grist and other media outlets name “green goes mainstream” as one of the top environmental news stories of the 2000-2009 decade.
- Environmental issues are at the forefront in the 2008 presidential election, after decades of being less of a priority in national elections.
- In April 2010, the explosion of a Gulf Coast oil rig – and the subsequent massive oil spill – again raised awareness of environmental, economic, social and consumer impacts of energy policy.

BECOMING
KNOWLEDGEABLE/
TRANSMITTING
INFORMATION

PHASE 3

- Earth Day, founded in 1970, takes environmental action and awareness to a new level, creating a way for everyone to become involved. Twenty million people demonstrate in rallies across the country. (The fact that 40 years later the event has become a tool of corporate marketers demonstrates its mainstream appeal, even as it draws criticism from environmental organizations concerned about “greenwashing.”)
- Beginning in the 1970s and continuing intermittently, Congress and individual states pass the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Bottle Bills, vehicle emission standards and other major regulations that elevate awareness and guide industry and individuals to take different actions.
- Environmental organizations, as well as green living fairs, websites and publications, reinforce the message that individual action affects the environment and provide tips on individual actions that can protect the environment *and* protect the individual and family from environmental harm.

CREATING A
PERSONAL
CONVICTION

PHASE 4

- Social activism in the 1960s shifts environmentalism from an intellectual debate to a grassroots movement. Far from mainstream, environmentalism is tagged to hippie culture.
- Reacting to detrimental policies and dismissal of the movement as irrelevant in the 1980s, a backlash of environmental activism rises in the 1990s, catapulting grassroots personal engagement into a much broader audience that cuts across ethnicity, race and class.
- In the 2000s and into the current decade, the emphasis is on personal actions such as recycling and mass transit, products such as fluorescent lightbulbs and low-flow toilets (many of which are now widely available in big-box stores across the country), and support for policy changes promoted by a plethora of organizations. (Notably, though, the 2009 spike in fuel prices got people out of their cars, but as soon as prices declined, driving went back up. Public will was not sufficient to maintain the change, illuminating a set-back and need for additional public engagement.)
- Corporations show their conviction by aligning their missions with environmentalism and creating green(er) products. In 2007, Google goes beyond its own business to create RE<C, a strategic initiative to develop electricity from renewable energy sources that will be cheaper than electricity produced from coal.
- College students stage rallies and take ownership of the issue. Their schools follow suit, developing environmental education programs and policies. In 2007, *Forbes* debuts its greenest colleges rankings, and students make enrollment decisions based on schools' environmental policies and practices.
- In the 2000s, mainstream celebrities take up environmentalism as their cause and drive their Priuses like a badge of honor. Cities vie for "greenest" titles.
- Corporations begin basing advertising and branding campaigns around "green" issues, including some oil and gas companies marketing themselves as responsible environmental stewards (notably, BP's image shift from British Petroleum to Beyond Petroleum). Some of these campaigns are authentic, reflecting actual shifts in practice and policy, while others are greenwashing. As a frame and movement grow in popularity, so does the potential for abuses and imitators. Strong public will leads audiences to examine and question false claims.
- An April 2010 poll shows that the majority of Americans (61 percent) consider themselves either active in or sympathetic to the environmental movement. Ninety percent have voluntarily recycled, 85 percent have reduced their household energy use, 76 percent have bought products specifically because they thought they were better for the environment, 81 percent use compact fluorescent light bulbs and 70 percent have used reusable shopping bags at grocery stores.ⁱ These normative shifts in behavior are a critical objective in public will building.

EVALUATING
WHILE
REINFORCING

PHASE 5

Shifting political leadership, emerging issues and intentional misinformation by opponents require the movement to continually adjust, re-engage supporters and attract new audiences. Often, this requires returning to a previous public will-building phase or starting the process over. For example, consider what is happening with one of today's most urgent and contentious environmental issues: climate change.

- **Framing:** Numerous scientists report measurable increases in the earth's temperature and link this change with human activity. The frame starts from a base of science and a tone of fear by evoking threats of natural disaster. It turns emotional when scientists release photographs of polar bears standing on their melting land. The movement continues to search for a frame that connects to quality of life and brings relevance to largely invisible environmental challenges, particularly when many Americans feel a sense of security in our increasingly clean air, water and land. Opponents counter with their own science and, at times, misinformation.
- **Awareness:** By 2005, news media jump on a story scientists have been telling since the 1980s, with attention skyrocketing when Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* becomes the third highest-grossing documentary of all time. Messaging and terminology continue to shift, from "greenhouse effect" (which failed because the prospect of warmer weather was welcome to many and a greenhouse sounded like a nice place to grow beautiful flowers) to "global warming" (which prompted conservative pundits to scoff on-air every time they reported on a blizzard) to "climate change" (which is still taking hold). Outreach focuses on the health and economic impacts of climate change, increasing relevance outside traditional environmental circles and creating a paradigm shift in ownership of the issue.

EVALUATING
WHILE
REINFORCING

 PHASE 5
continued

- **Knowledge:** Organizations launch numerous individual campaigns calling on Americans to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions (conserve energy, drive less, reduce consumerism, etc.) and let their political representatives know that their vote will be influenced by environmental commitment.
- **Conviction:** National organizations such as 350.org, Change.org and many others create online communities where people can join up, sign pledges, send letters to policymakers, connect with local events and create a movement.
- **Evaluating/reinforcing:** The 2010 Earth Day poll found that over the past two years Americans have become less worried about the threat of global warming, less convinced that its effects are already happening and more likely to believe that scientists themselves are uncertain about its occurrence.ⁱ In other words, public will has not been fully established and the science is still under debate.

» CONCLUSION

Public will for environmental protection has increased exponentially in recent decades, driving increased news media coverage, political attention, commercial and social links, and ownership and participation among the majority of Americans. It has found its place as a core American value through the ongoing commitment of many organizations and individuals, and has continually changed with the times to remain relevant and urgent.

It is important to note that the movement's progression through the phases of public will building has not been linear. For each step forward, there are often several steps back to correct misinformation (denial of a human hand in climate change) and abuses of the public's trust (greenwashing campaigns), tweak the frame to appeal to emerging audience values (health and economics) and provide new ways to get involved (social media campaigns and virtual communities).

As countless people have propelled the environmental movement ahead over the years, so have many worked to evolve thinking about health and to reform our system of coverage and care. Progressive reformers started fighting for health insurance in 1910. The battle continued, interrupted at times by war and public malaise, finally celebrating a victory when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Medicare and Medicaid into law in 1965. Costs have continued to rise, the system has become increasingly entrenched and complex, and the nation is spending more money for worse health than any other developed nation. Forty-six million Americans are uninsured: More than 9 million of them are children; more than 8 out of 10 are in working families.ⁱⁱ

The good news is that more people than ever before are paying attention. The issue is squarely on the national stage. Politicians are being held to their promises of reform, and many advocates are contributing to solutions. In coming months and years, as federal health care reform is implemented and state-level advances are pursued, there is a unique and vital opportunity to capitalize on the momentum. A public-will building strategy provides the means to increase awareness, understanding and long-term, sustainable support.

» ENDNOTES

- i Straub N. Gallup poll finds most Americans supporting enviro movement. *Greenwire*. April 23, 2010. Available at: <http://www.greenchange.org/article.php?id=5766>. Accessed May 4, 2010.
- ii Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Cover the Uninsured. Available at: http://covertheuninsured.org/the_issue. Accessed May 4, 2010.

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