

ISSUE BRIEF

LESSONS FOR HEALTH CARE ADVOCATES

BEYOND THE TALKING POINTS: Engaging the Public in Conversations on Health Care Reform

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» INTRODUCTION

Health advocates across the country are talking about health care reform and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) specifically. In living rooms, workplaces, community events and everywhere in between, conversations are taking place to inform people about health care reform, including how the changes might affect them, what information they might need to know and what actions they can take to help increase awareness and understanding. Advocates are often equipped with communications materials such as talking points, frequently asked questions, flyers and brochures, along with access to websites and social media tools. Numerous communications toolkits exist in an effort to educate a wide array of audiences, such as individuals, families, small businesses, people without insurance and others. Despite the potential of each interaction to build awareness and understanding, many advocates find that conversations can be unproductive, particularly when people have strongly held values and misconceptions that are difficult to get past. The intensity of opposition messaging and the political nature of the conversation add to these difficulties. As such, sometimes the right talking points are just not enough to engage people in a conversation. In many cases, the tone, emotions and interpersonal dynamics of a conversation are just as important as the words themselves, if not more so.

From 2011 to 2013, Project Health Colorado, a community-focused effort designed to engage individuals and organizations in a statewide discussion about health care and how it can be improved, supported people throughout Colorado to discuss access to health. Over 20,000 people were reached in-person by street teams, community members and staff.¹ Many of these community volunteers and organizational staff chose to talk about health reform and build their audiences' awareness, understanding and commitment to improve access to health in Colorado. As a result of these conversations, community volunteers and staff applied different techniques for how to engage the public in conversations about health care reform. Notably, the volunteers and staff also generated key lessons for other advocates to consider for guiding these critical conversations.



Street teams in the community engaging Coloradans in discussions about Project Health Colorado and introducing them to opportunities to share their ideas and ask questions about how to improve access to health. *(Photo provided by SE2)*

(Introduction continued on next page.)

This brief explores the experiences of three Project Health Colorado messengers for health care reform. One messenger was a volunteer (community member) with the Stapleton Foundation's *be well* initiative, while the other two were part of the street teams deployed by SE2 as part of Project Health Colorado's communications campaign. This brief, which is primarily intended for community health advocates and organizations engaged in supporting community dialogues on health care reform, highlights a few of the key interpersonal skills to be attentive to when engaging the public in conversations about health care reform. These interpersonal skills, which are often not covered in communications toolkits and training on health reform or are only briefly mentioned, are central to preparing effective messengers and facilitating productive conversations. They are the skills more often found in community mobilization and other community-driven dialogues. Further, the tips and lessons in this brief were generated by and grounded in the direct experiences of community volunteers and staff who engaged Coloradans in discussions on health reform and best practices from communications and community-mobilization literature.

» PROJECT HEALTH COLORADO

Project Health Colorado was created as a group of organizations and individuals interested in discussing health care issues, learning more and standing together to make health care work better for Coloradans. By asking questions, getting straight answers and encouraging people across the state to be part of the solution, Project Health Colorado believes it will make a difference in how decisions are made about health care. Project Health Colorado was funded by The Colorado Trust, a health foundation with the vision that all Coloradans should have fair and equal opportunities to lead healthy, productive lives regardless of race, ethnicity, income or where we live. Project Health Colorado built on the work of 13

organizational partners funded by The Trust to help foster the necessary awareness, understanding and, ultimately, support for the kind of changes that will help achieve access to health for all Coloradans. Additional funding for those partners was provided by The Colorado Health Foundation, whose vision is to make Colorado the healthiest state in the nation. The communication and messaging experiences outlined in this brief build on the training Project Health Colorado participants received from Spitfire Strategies, one of the Project Health Colorado communications consultants focused on providing technical assistance to nonprofits and foundations to make social change happen.

» STAPLETON *be well*

The Stapleton Foundation believes that communities can come together to take charge of their health and wellness. Through the community-driven *be well* initiative, staff and volunteers share information about health and healthy living, host heart health screening events, host activities and classes, and engage youth, businesses and community members to live healthier

lives. *Be well* Block Captains participated in Project Health Colorado, which included training on how to talk about health care access and health reform. The Block Captains engaged in one-on-one conversations with people in their neighborhoods and convened community conversations where health reform experts presented and answered questions.

» STREET TEAMS

As part of outreach efforts for Project Health Colorado, street teams were developed and sent out to large community events to engage Coloradans in discussions about the project, including introducing them to opportunities for people to share their ideas and ask questions about how to improve access to health. Street Team staff set up booths at fairs and other community events equipped with tablet computers and supplied with brochures and other takeaways. They were trained to approach people proactively and initiate the conversation by asking, "Do you have any questions about health care

in Colorado?" or "Are you happy about your health care situation?" People were engaged using tablet computers to view the Project Health Colorado website while discussing what exactly health care means to them. The goal of attending the events was to bring Coloradans into a statewide conversation about health care access. The Street Team model was designed and supported by SE2, a communications consulting firm that partnered with Project Health Colorado, with additional support provided by Cactus Marketing Communications.

I KNOW I'M RIGHT, SO WHY WOULD I LISTEN TO YOU?

Samantha,² part of Project Health Colorado's street team, was manning a booth at a local fair and above her was a banner reading "Project Health Colorado." Most conversations that day had been initiated by Samantha as she approached people to ask them about their opinions on health care in Colorado. Yet someone would occasionally start the conversation themselves, such as when an older woman with a white fanny pack approached the booth. The woman wanted to talk about health reform and the Affordable Care Act. She was angry and adamant that the only way to solve today's problems is through socialized medicine, stating, "We pay taxes. The government needs to take care of us."

Her aggressive tone left Samantha feeling scolded, as it wasn't a conversation, but rather a one-sided debate. She was on the receiving end of a lecture about how the government needs to take care of everyone in the same way. Samantha did her best to engage the woman by showing her the Project Health Colorado website, which would allow the woman to share her opinion while becoming part of a broader conversation about health care access. The conversation, however, never got to a positive place. Samantha listened to the woman's strong opinions, shared a brochure about the website, yet was unable to verbally share the information in the context of the one-sided debate.

*Changing the Conversation*³

Health care reform is a hotly debated topic, but when trying to help someone better understand it, encouraging the debate may not be helpful. One strategy when facing someone who is ready to debate and argue is to listen, reflect and then reframe. Reframing is a technique for taking the emotional context and point of view that someone is sharing and placing it into a new context, which can change the conversation and its tone entirely. Reframing is difficult and it's even harder to reframe a negative view than it is to reframe a positive view, and yet, there are many negative views on health reform that need to be reframed.



Reframing happens through active listening and typically includes reflecting some words, ignoring others, and reformulating how the person is saying something and what they are saying. Some examples of reframing are:

They say:	"We pay taxes; the government needs to take care of us."		"Obamacare is socialism; it's a big government takeover of health care."
Reframe:	"The Affordable Care Act actually expands government's support for health care with significant improvements to better protect and take care of us."	or	"The Affordable Care Act actually maintains the private market – with significant improvements to better protect patients and families."
Follow-up:	"Your health coverage should include more options for preventive care, more affordable options and more protections for your coverage. And if you're covered under an individual plan or are uninsured, you can shop for health insurance on a new online exchange marketplace."		

"(It is) easy to get into the political debate that deteriorates quickly, but I am part of the problem if I do that." ~ Volunteer

WHY SHOULD I TRUST YOU?

A young woman and her mother stood in line at a food bank. As Alejandro approached them to talk about health reform and access to health care they said, “Just because we’re here to get food doesn’t mean we need what you’re offering.” He started wishing in that moment that he hadn’t approached them. This was going to be a tough conversation. Alejandro spoke about being a Block Captain and having information to share about health reform and health fairs, emphasizing that he wasn’t asking for anything from them, but was merely giving out useful information. Both women seemed skeptical, questioning who was paying him to talk to them and what he was getting out of this. Alejandro felt like he was on trial, facing criticism for no reason: “They chewed me up!”

Alejandro concentrated on keeping his body language and the tone of his voice pleasant, patient and engaging. He knew that these factors could affect the women’s perception of whether or not he was being honest and open with them. He relied on his training from the Stapleton Foundation more than anything else to provide him with ideas on what to say and do during this conversation. Alejandro thought the women were unlikely to follow through on the actions although he had shared information with them about health reform, local health fairs and what was currently available to them. In sum, it appeared that the information he provided was not able to overcome the trust barriers and thus lead to a new understanding of health reform.

Building Trust Before Delivering Talking Points⁴

Trust is a critical part of conversations, particularly on public policy and social issues. Health care is also an intensely personal issue, making trust all the more important, and all the more challenging to develop. This sort of distrust can make approaching someone, especially a stranger, to talk about health reform very difficult.

Much of the training around health reform has focused on specific population issues and specific content that needs to be shared – for example, how insurance reforms will benefit young people, women or seniors; or what steps people without insurance need to take to get health insurance. However, sometimes in the absence of trust, it’s challenging to even begin a conversation about health reform. Trust is built through small actions and it takes time. Based on the experiences of community volunteers, such as Alejandro, when building trust, it’s important to:

- **Be aware of the issues and the emotions being shared by not shying away from those emotions.** When talking to someone who is expressing distrust, acknowledge it and even consider sharing your own doubts when someone approaches you.
- **Accept and try to understand the other person’s views even if it’s uncomfortable.** As the conversation becomes more comfortable and friendly, then transition to building understanding and willingness to take action.
- **Pay attention to body language.** As Alejandro did, be non-defensive both verbally and physically regardless of what they say by not taking any negative comments personally.
- **Demonstrate empathy with their experiences and views.**



Matching the tone of the message with the content is also important. For example, when providing good news, frame it as an opportunity by using a positive, upbeat tone and body language. Conversely, when acknowledging challenges people have faced with health care, use a less optimistic, more empathetic tone.

Sharing your content, such as flyers, handouts and talking points, can potentially be a barrier to building trust. Instead, seek to build awareness of their point of view, show your audience that you accept it and engage with empathy. This can involve sharing similar experiences or emotions. As the tone begins to shift, wait and watch for the right moment to bring up the opportunities available through health reform. Finally, a little humor can go a long way in breaking down barriers, therefore consider bringing some levity to the conversation in order to further engage your audiences.

“I start the conversation by sharing my own story...people are willing to talk to me, they seek me out, because they know that I know what it is like.” ~ Volunteer

NOBODY CARES WHAT HAPPENS TO US

Alejandro joined a team of volunteers at a booth during a local fair. With materials about health care reform, talking points and his training from the Stapleton Foundation, he felt ready to talk to the public with the hopes of creating awareness about access to health. A young mother approached the booth with multiple small children in tow. She was upset at how difficult it has been to access coverage for herself and her kids. She seemed angry at how the health care system has treated her family, and strongly believed that no one in the health care system cared about what was happening to people like her. Her understanding of the individual mandate was that she would be required to buy insurance even though she couldn't afford to pay for it.

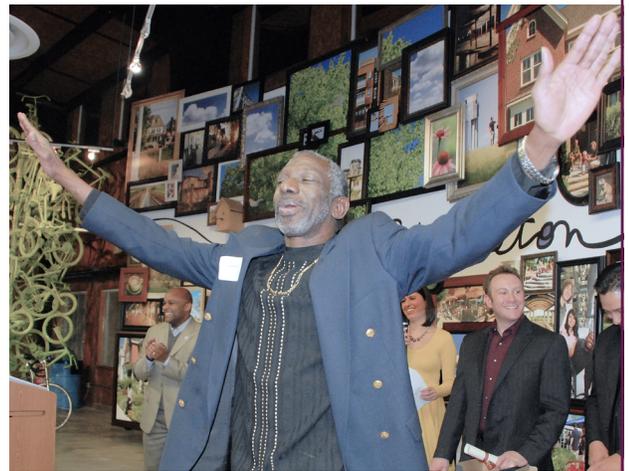
Alejandro had a choice to make. He could dive right into discussing the upcoming opportunities to access coverage through the Affordable Care Act or he could respond to what she was actually saying. Alejandro decided to listen, acknowledge and apologize for how people have treated her and her family. He then talked about how the future could look different. It wasn't an easy conversation at first, but gradually it changed into a positive interaction. Even as she chased her children around with the seeming desire to move on, she listened and learned about how the mandate works. Alejandro shared with her that insurance will be affordable, and the steps she could take to access health insurance through the marketplace. By the end of the conversation, Alejandro felt confident that the mother was motivated to take action using the materials he shared.

*Building Motivation to Take Action*⁵

One approach to engaging in complex, potentially contentious conversations is to focus on building motivation to take action. Drawing on techniques that counselors use to help their clients take action, building motivation can be done through using a non-judgmental, non-confrontational and non-adversarial approach. Building motivation together requires developing trust. Once trust is established, the conversation can focus on incrementally improving confidence and conviction to make change. Part of building motivation is helping to define specific achievable goals and exploring and resolving the barriers preventing action within an empathetic and accepting atmosphere.

In working to build motivation, the first step is to engage someone in talking about the issues they are experiencing, including their concerns and hopes. The second step is to create an opportunity for action by building their confidence and aiding them in developing a plan of action. Let's review how this worked for Alejandro:

- He took the time to listen and acknowledge the experiences of the mother he met at the fair, including her sense of frustration and despair.
- He then directed the conversation to a specific way that things could change for the mother by accessing affordable health insurance through the marketplace.
- Alejandro continued the conversation long enough for the mother to change her tone and demeanor towards health care, building her motivation to take action and access affordable health insurance for her family.
- Before ending the conversation, Alejandro shared all of the information the mother needed to follow through and access health insurance.



"(I don't) approach somebody with an agenda. I ask questions and explore their understanding." ~ Volunteer

AMPLIFY YOUR REACH

Chris, a member of Project Health Colorado's Street Team, was working a booth at a marathon running expo in an energized, upbeat crowd. When a teacher came up to talk with him, they connected around their past experiences attending the same college and then started to talk about health reform. The teacher had health insurance provided through her school district and was satisfied, but she asked about information she could share with students and their families. Chris discovered with a little probing that she was concerned with how many middle school students are not visiting the dentist and her students' ongoing tooth pain. She also had some broader concerns about the ability of her students to access health care of all types.

Chris did not have a handout about how the Affordable Care Act is expanding access to dental care for children, but he used his tablet computer to show her relevant online resources. He pulled up the Project Health Colorado website where she could ask questions and get answers, and a list of dental clinics offering free and low-cost services. Chris felt that the interaction ended on a positive note as she took the information and headed back into the frenzy of the crowd.

Leveraging Natural Champions⁶

Sometimes the people we engage might already have insurance or be satisfied with their access to care. However, this does not mean the conversation has no value. Someone who feels satisfied about their personal situation may, like the teacher in this story, recognize that other people they know don't have the care they need. In the context of a short interaction at an event, it can be hard to know what to do with that sort of interest but these people present an opportunity we do not want to lose. They can amplify and spread out messages to people whose paths we may never cross. Here are opportunities to engage people who want to share the messages:

- People's willingness to act is tied to how safe they feel about taking action. This means you need to ask questions to find out what types of actions are in their comfort zone. Maybe the teacher is willing to share information with parents or talk to her principal about what she learned.
- Hope can motivate people to take action. When people feel like there is an action they can take that will make a difference, they are more hopeful. Try emphasizing the positive outcomes that are possible rather than focusing on the problem they are trying to solve. Instead of stressing the issue of children not having dental care, talk about how much easier it is now for parents to access dental care for their children.
- People's willingness to act increases when they see others taking action too. Share examples of what others have done. Perhaps you can talk about a school that is sharing information on how to sign up for health insurance with parents. Maybe you can also talk about your own experiences when speaking with parents about how to get care for their children.

In addition, provide the person with follow-up materials, resources and contact information. In particular, having someone readily available for them to contact once they are ready for more information or are seeking to take action can generate a willingness to take further action.



"I think that my strength is my general passion for sharing. I truly believe that everyone should have access to the health care they need when they need it, I truly believe that in my heart." ~ Block Captain

» CONCLUSION

Even the best prepared communications materials may not be enough when facing the tough interpersonal dynamics that are a part of talking about health reform. Staff and volunteers who engaged in discussions through Project Health Colorado had many unique experiences, and the common thread was the need to pay attention to context and emotions before sharing the content and talking points.

To prepare effective messengers for health reform:

- **Interpersonal skills matter.** When talking with Project Health Colorado’s volunteers and staff, they emphasized that the more roleplaying and scenarios included in trainings, the more opportunities they had to build the skills that help break down barriers between advocates and the intended audience.
- **Difficult conversations need flexible responses.** Volunteers and staff need to have conversational tools at their fingertips to honor the tone, including skills at reframing and knowing how to build trust.
- **Authenticity and trust are essential.** Being able to tailor messages and outreach techniques to suit the audiences or the situation is critical in building trust and presenting yourself in an authentic way. Mistrust, misunderstandings and opposition messaging can be barriers to hearing the key takeaways you want your audience to receive.

As one volunteer involved with Project Health Colorado shared, building trust and engaging in productive conversations about access to health require being vulnerable and connecting with people. It is the interpersonal skills and ability to demonstrate understanding and empathy that open the door to talking about health reform.



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Spark Policy Institute partners with communities, policymakers and the public to find solutions to complex issues that bridge sectors, policy issues, levels of government and diverse beliefs and values. Spark served as the evaluators and real-time strategic learning coaches for Project Health Colorado.



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Spitfire Strategies is a national consulting firm offering nonprofits and foundations top-notch strategic communications and campaign planning, training, counsel and tools to make a significant impact. Spitfire Strategies provided communications, technical assistance and message coaching for Project Health Colorado grantee partners, as well as provided input for this brief.



» ENDNOTES

- 1 Based on data reported by street team staff and grantee organizations, verified by Spark Policy Institute.
- 2 Names of the street team and block captain members have been changed to protect confidentiality.
- 3 Spitfire Strategies. Grantee Convening for Project Health Colorado. May 2011.
- 4 Smith JA and Paxton P. America’s trust fall. *Greater Good: The Science of Meaningful Life*. http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/americas_trust_fall. Accessed November 9, 2013. Gottman J. John Gottman on trust and betrayal. *Greater Good: The Science of Meaningful Life*. http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/john_gottman_on_trust_and_betrayal/. Accessed November 9, 2013. Navigator Training from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services. <http://marketplace.cms.gov/training/get-training.html> Accessed November 9, 2013. Patel A. Building trust: 5 tips to enhance your patient relationships. *Professional Patient Advocate Institute*. <http://www.patientadvocatetraining.com/news/63380/Building-Trust-5-Tips-to-Enhance-Your-Patient-Relationships.htm>. Accessed November 9, 2013.
- 5 Miller WR and Rollnick S. *Motivational Interviewing, Third Edition: Helping People Change (Applications of Motivational Interviewing)*. New York: The Guilford Press. 2012.
- 6 Grimm K. *Discovering the activation point: Smart strategies to make people act*. 2006; Washington, D.C.: Spitfire Strategies.



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