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Early Childhood Councils Health Integration Evaluation Brief Report #3: Communications and Messaging for Early Childhood Health

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Every organization needs to be effective at communicating with its key audiences. However, for some organizations, like Early Childhood Councils, effective communication is a cornerstone of their efforts to engage stakeholders and lead meaningful change in their communities.

The 1997 authorizing legislation that created Colorado's Early Childhood Councils (Councils) defined the role of the councils as "improving and sustaining the availability, accessibility, capacity and quality of early childhood services for children and families throughout the state."¹ In order to fulfill that role, Colorado's Councils need to effectively engage a broad coalition of partners behind a unified vision, as well as, ensure that the coalition of partners provides a continuum of services under four domains - Early Learning; Family Support and Parent Education; Social, Emotional and Mental Health; and Health.

Effective messaging and communications are critical components in ensuring that key early childhood stakeholders - from parents to early childhood organizations, and early childhood funders and policymakers - are working in a coordinated fashion to develop an effective system of support for young children and their families. Despite the critical role of messaging and communications, this remains an underdeveloped area for many of Colorado's Councils. Councils often operate with lean staffing and limited resources, which often necessitates prioritizing funding to support tangible efforts such as additional training for early childhood providers or implementing a standardized developmental screening tool in a community.

However, messaging and communications are lynch pins in the Councils' role as both conveners of collaborative efforts and repositories of knowledge that empower parents and providers to best meet the needs of young children. The purpose of this

Summary of Recommendations

1. *Plan first, write second, and disseminate purposefully.*
2. *Localize materials whenever possible.*
3. *Develop a persuasive message and train others to disseminate it.*
4. *Prior to disseminating communications material, test them with your target audiences.*
5. *Ensure consistency and relevancy in messaging across multiple mediums.*
6. *Pick your visuals carefully – they should provide information, not just look good.*
7. *Identify and track the outcomes of your communications material.*

brief is to increase knowledge regarding best practices in communications and messaging among Colorado's Early Childhood Councils that subsequently can be applied to existing efforts in this area.

CONTEXT

The Colorado Trust's Early Childhood Health Integration Strategy, a five-year, \$5 million investment "assists Early Childhood Councils in building local systems infrastructures that better integrate health and health care as a means to improve health outcomes for children throughout the State."² Aligned with this focus is a recognition that under-resourced Councils need tools and, in some cases, training to support their efforts in this area.

Three years of implementation of the Early Childhood Health Integration Strategy, has resulted in both The Colorado Trust and participating Councils identifying areas where additional support

would significantly benefit the Councils in their work to better integrate the health domain into local systems of support for young children. One of these areas is messaging and communications.

Colorado's Early Childhood Councils' messaging and communications strategies have multiple purposes, including increasing awareness of the role of the Councils; increasing awareness of the importance of oral health, physical health and social development in optimizing child well-being; encouraging parents to partake in a range of health services offered through partner organizations; strengthening health services provided to young children and their families; and informing policymakers and partners of gaps in the early childhood system, among others.

Colorado's Early Childhood Systems Building Inventory, developed by the Colorado Department of Health and Human Services, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Education, "includes recommendations and best practices, compiled, gleaned, or otherwise distilled from the early childhood systems work that has been in progress in Colorado for the last 12 years."³ The Inventory highlights the importance of public engagement in the Councils' work and the role of messaging and communications in strengthening public engagement. The Inventory defines the features of high performing Councils in this area as "the establishment of a public engagement campaign that identifies the desired change, target audience, messaging and what the target audience is being asked to do; campaign implementation is monitored and adjusted to ensure effectiveness; campaign results are captured and reported back to the stakeholders; and, data from campaign is used to inform future campaigns."⁴

In order to cultivate the public engagement skills that contribute to high performing Councils, The Colorado Trust has provided several communications and messaging workshops to the Councils. These workshops provided tips and training on effective communications and messaging strategies, including *identity* messaging, engaging and communicating with audiences and preparing content for distribution.

This brief, the third in a series of briefs on Councils' health integration efforts, builds upon the hands-on messaging and communications training the Councils received and leverages learning and best practices generated by both the national literature and by the Councils themselves with the goal of strengthening communications and messaging related to early childhood and health.

RESEARCH METHODS

To better understand the context of communications strategies among the Councils and potential communications practices that would benefit them moving forward, a formative evaluation study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

- What are the communications best practices relevant to Colorado Councils?
- What are current and planned communications strategies among Colorado Councils, specific to communicating about health?
- What is the effectiveness of specific communications approaches, and what does that tell us about potential recommended practices?

Recognizing that the Councils operate in different environments and are focused on different health issues, the brief also examines variations in engagement strategies in the context of urban versus rural settings. The following research methods were used:

- Best practices review using literature on Councils and communications more broadly;
- A survey of 21 Councils to understand current communications practices;
- In-depth interviews with five Council staff members to better understand their communications practices; and
- Four focus groups with the target audience of a specific communications material, testing whether the intended message was received and identifying ways to improve the effectiveness of the material. The results of these focus groups are included as four separate pullouts at the end of the brief.

Survey and interview data were coded together and the codes were analyzed to generate themes. These themes are embedded into the best practices review below. The focus groups were analyzed separately and generated their own findings.

COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES

Communications strategies have been evaluated and tested in many settings, leading to a rich body of information on how to engage in best practices of communicating your message.

The practices below represent a key set of actions any Council can take to improve the outcomes of their communications. Along with best practices, specific examples and general trends from Colorado's Councils are included.

PART A | PLAN IT

An effective communications strategy starts with purposeful and participatory planning as well as securing the necessary resources. As you plan your process, consider the following four components:

1. Match your organization's values.

It is critical that the message in your communications material mirrors the organization's core values. While each communication that goes out from an organization does not need to contain the organization's mission or vision statement, there should be a clear link back to what the organization does, stands for, or represents.⁵

Some Councils generate communications material tied to the key goals of their council.

Some Councils were very clear in their survey responses that they have carefully tied their communications strategies to the goals of their council. For example, one respondent explained that the purpose of their communications, clearly documented in their strategic plan, was to:

"Design culturally relevant activities to help parents understand Developmental Milestones/School Readiness and feel supported during times of transition."

Other respondents articulated purposes that visibly align with the primary intent of their health integration work, such as:

"Raising parent awareness of the importance of developmental and social and emotional screenings, when they should happen, where they are available (free), age-based developmental milestones and evidence-based tools [to] help their child achieve milestones."

However, articulating a concrete goal for communications that align with the Councils overall goals is only a first step. The actual messages that are part of specific communications material should also reflect the organization's goals, values, and mission. From the data collected, it was clear that some material are more narrowly focused on communicating about events and do not include the broader context of the Council's mission and values.

2. Have a clear purpose and audience.

Second, the planned communications should be purposeful, with a specific target population or populations in mind and clear, measureable outcomes that the messaging will achieve⁶. More specifically, within the target audience, there should be some expected behavioral change⁷;—for example, engaging parents of children under three who have never been to a dentist to attend a free dental screening event. If communications are planned with specific, measurable objectives, not only is the messaging more focused, but it should then also be easier to track the success of the messaging campaign.

Many, but not all, Councils are targeting their material.

The survey and interviews identified many examples of materials targeted to specific audiences, both professionals and parents. For example, Councils interviewed explained that they have materials specifically targeted to parents of young children, with the assumption that the parents they reach will further distribute the information through their networks. Other Councils explained that the target audience for their material is other professionals who come into contact with parents of young children.

Some Councils may not have a strong understanding of how to target their material to specific audiences. Councils reported combining target audiences, with material intended for both parents with young children and early childhood providers. Multiple Councils reported a focus on getting their information out to “as many community members as possible,” with the same assumption that people will share information with parents. One Council explained that they “want everyone to have the same information,” which may suggest a lack of understanding about how aligning the message with the audience can increase its effectiveness.

Some Councils are able to articulate and even measure the outcomes of their communications efforts.

A purposeful communications effort not only articulates the target audience, but also articulates a measurable outcome that you hope to achieve with that target audience. Some Councils were able to clearly articulate their desired outcomes, often because their messaging material are focused on recruiting parents for programs and events. In these cases, they reported measuring success in turnout, with some Councils making a point to find out how attendees learned about the event. This allowed them to compare the effectiveness of different communications strategies.

One Council went further, creating an outcomes and efforts database that tracks families who reported they would attend a program/event and which ones did attend. Another Council tracked referral sources, as they distributed their material through partner organizations.

All of the examples of measurable outcomes and tracking were related to attendance and engagement. Some messaging material focus on activities that parents can do at home, however, and this type of outcome was not something Councils reported measuring.

3. Engage your stakeholders.

Planning for a communications or messaging campaign should be done in partnership with the representatives of the target audience and/or other community organizations. Capturing information

from the target audience helps to ensure the messaging is appropriate to a given community and that it will resonate. Working with other organizations helps to create alignment, but can also help in tailoring the message appropriately to the target audience.⁸ For example, health providers often have a high level of experience working directly with the target population of many of the Councils’ communications materials on health.

When working in diverse communities, a community liaison should be included (especially if there is a language barrier)⁹ from which to solicit community feedback and gauge how a message will resonate with a different segment of the community.

Some Councils actively partner with other community organizations to develop material.

Some Councils report working with an existing work group to help with messages, while others reached out beyond those meetings. Stakeholders engaged in communications planning included health partners, businesses, early childhood service agencies, education providers, home visitation programs, and other community providers.

A few Councils reported going beyond engaging their partners in the development of communications material to creating shared communications material with their partners. They found different ways of engaging in mutually beneficial communications planning, highlighting their partners in their Council’s communications material, tracking down information needed by partners, and developing and presenting “a unified message whenever possible.” One Council reported using quarterly regional meetings to work together on common messaging, while others had more informal means of coordinating their communications planning.

Some Councils informally seek feedback from families.

Four of 21 survey respondents reported that their Council has used focus groups to test their messages. Other Councils reported taking recent steps to secure funding that would allow for focus groups and surveys to test communications material. More common, however, was informal testing of the message with families or with family representatives

on the Council and its committees. For example, one Council solicits feedback from parents they can easily access at their local Head Start program.

4. Dedicate the needed resources.

Communication in all its forms requires resources, whether it is time spent by staff in word-of-mouth networking, printing for flyers, or even specialized skills like website design. In planning for communications, it is important to be aware of these costs and ensure that adequate resources are available to fully carry out the established communications plan.¹⁰ Avoid launching a communications effort that runs the risk of being “under-resourced or under-exposed”¹¹ as this will defeat the purpose and can waste resources.

Most Councils have limited resources available for communications.

Among 21 Councils responding to the survey, 13 (62%) reported that they do have a budget to cover communications expenses. In interviews, Council staff indicated these budgets are small, largely covering printing costs. One Council was successful in securing more significant funds to help with branding, while another secured support from local funders and partners for their School Readiness calendar.

Having the resources available goes beyond printing and dissemination costs. It also means having the time and expertise to plan and prepare high quality communications material. As some Councils noted, limited resources result in not having a communications plan and relying more on “word-of-mouth” strategies for communications.

In-kind support helps Councils extend reach.

Some of the Councils were able to identify ways that their local community provides in-kind and financial support to their communications, including free placement in the newspaper, providing access to material already developed, providing expertise to help develop material, and purchasing advertising space in their communications material. All of these strategies extended the resources available to the Councils to implement communications strategies.

PART B | WRITE IT

Once the communications are planned, with a target audience, and dedicated resources, the next step is to actually write the messaging. There are three primary areas highlighted as best practices in the literature about how community-based organizations can write effective messaging:

1. Know your context.

Communications at the community level must take into account the surrounding community. Specifically, the messaging should be reflective of and sensitive to the community’s needs, values and health priorities.¹² This shows that the organization is “in touch” with its community and increases the likelihood of communications being favorably received.

Some Councils align communications with context.

This practice comes naturally to some of the Councils, as they reported localizing their material through a variety of strategies, including using demographic and other data from each community they target, providing stories about local people, using pictures of local children, using a visual format that is commonly used in other community material, and being:

“...intentional about identifying community needs and issues relevant to children and families in the community.”

However, many Early Childhood Council materials are not adapted to the local context. Out of 21 Councils responding to the survey, 13 (62%) reported using materials created outside their community and implemented without any changes. Most of these Councils also reported having their own or adapted materials, but this does indicate that at least some of the materials being disseminated by the Councils related to health are not localized at all.

Understanding the community context is also critical for using a strengths-based approach in messaging. Strength-based messaging is also a best practice, and relies on highlighting the existing strengths of community members and organizations.¹³ For example, literature suggests that in low-income communities, communications should be realistic,

keeping in mind that an individual's financial situation may mean that some undesirable or less-than healthy behaviors will continue despite attempts to change behaviors. Therefore in messaging, it is helpful to highlight positive changes that they can do, instead of a "what not to do" frame.¹⁴

2. Focus at the individual-level.

Specifically for health communications, the level of focus should be at the individual level to mobilize and empower individuals.¹⁵ While communications should be directed at the individual level, acknowledging the role of individual efficacy and decision-making, it should not be so exclusively focused at the individual level that one feels personal blame or shame for creating problems¹⁶ (such as having unhealthy children, or blame for not taking a child to the doctor regularly).

Councils are creating communications material focused at the individual level.

Many Councils may have an intuitive grasp of this best practice. When they identified the purposes for their communications material, almost all Councils reported specific and individual level focuses, such as:

"To create a change in culture to help families to understand the value [of] oral health at a young age. To offer resources to help parents reach that goal."

"To give families information that will help them increase the health and well-being of their children."

"Raising parent awareness of the importance of developmental and social and emotional screenings, when they should happen, where they are available."

Examples of Council material shared through the focus group process highlighted positive framing, not personal blame or shame, in the individually focused material.

3. Include a call to action.

Finally, in writing communications, not only should it be directed at the individual, but it should also include a call to action for that individual. One way

to accomplish this is to present messaging in a cost/benefit analysis that highlights benefits for acting and costs of not acting, while being sure that the messaging leaves individuals feeling confident that they can overcome any barriers and that the benefits far outweigh any costs.¹⁷ For example, Councils could highlight the benefits of a health screening, the potential risks of not being screened, and that the screening is free, quick, or located somewhere accessible such as a local school.

Note, however, that it is important to find a balance in your messaging. Risks must seem serious enough that the target audience does not self-select out because they perceive themselves to be low/no risk, but risk must not seem so great that it raises anxiety or induces stress. Be mindful about the use of any numbers or visuals and how risk is perceived.¹⁸ When crafting this type of message for the first time, it may be a great opportunity to purposefully collect feedback from your target audience.

Many Council materials are explicitly about the call to action.

Councils participating in the interview process were able to clearly articulate concrete calls to action that are part of their material, as could also be seen in the material tested through the focus groups. The material are heavily focused on engaging parents and their young children in specific Council sponsored activities, such as trainings and screenings.

One of the materials tested in a focus group was an excellent example of a "call to action" that went beyond a specific event. This material, a child development calendar, included multiple, specific actions a parent could take with their child for each month. These actions were tied to various developmental needs. Most of the "asks" in the calendar were small and something that a parent could do at home. Others were larger, addressing healthcare needs of the child, such as getting vaccinations. Example small asks included:

"Practice (with your child) hand-washing, bathing, feeding oneself, dressing, and brushing teeth."

"Name a letter and have your child find items beginning with that letter."

“Help your child practice zipping his coat and then take a walk.”

4. Be responsive to the language of your audience.

When working in linguistically diverse communities, translated material must be available. It is critical to make sure translation is the correct “version” for the specific community you are reaching out to¹⁹ —in other words, you aren’t looking for a word-for-word translation as the intent can sometimes get lost. Instead, work with a community liaison or someone else from the diverse community to get feedback on your translation or even assist with it. Some literature suggests that bilingual material may be preferable as parents may be non-English speakers, but their children will be learning English in school and they often help translate or interpret for their parents.²⁰

Evidence of Council responsiveness to cultural and linguistic differences.

A few Councils report tailoring material to be relevant to culturally distinct subpopulations, such as the immigrant population in their community. Others report being aware of this need and even having plans to focus more on tailoring their material.

“Because of the diversity and cultural variances in our rural towns and cities, we will need to tailor messaging ads, brochures, and questionnaires that adapt to each community’s needs.”

Others focused more on linguistic tailoring, such as providing material in Spanish and English. Among the 21 survey respondents, nearly all reported providing bi-lingual material (81%) and 48% reported consulting with a liaison from the community for feedback prior to disseminating the material.

PART C | DISSEMINATE IT

After a communications campaign is carefully planned and written, it must be put in place. It is not as straight-forward as hitting “send” on an email or posting flyers on the church bulletin board. Below are six best practices to keep in mind when releasing communications.

1. Disseminate in multiple, purposeful ways.

Communicating with a community is usually not a one-size-fits-all task, but instead may require different strategies for different portions of the population. It is important to be aware of diversity and differences within a community and be prepared to use different communications tools (print, electronic, in-person, etc.) or even different messages to best reach different segments of the population.²¹ For example, the medium that best reaches young, working mothers may be different than what is needed to reach stay-at-home parents. Or, electronic-based communications may be lost on those without home computers or internet connections. One of the best strategies remains one-on-one communication. This can be very effective when getting people to change behaviors. One-on-one communication may be more difficult in rural settings²² and therefore require a different strategy.

Many Councils prioritize one-on-one communication.

The Councils interviewed described many different mechanisms for face-to-face communication, often one-on-one with parents. They reach families where they are already going, such as the local Family Fun Fest, Head Start, elementary schools, the Healthy Child Clinic, and other community events. They described the importance of the personal interaction, noting that events suffered lack of attendance when they didn’t recruit in person.

Council staff recognized that word-of-mouth needs to come from a trusted source.

“We are finding out from our communities however, that the staff person and the relationship they have with families – that word of the mouth from a trusted source – is the best way of getting the information out to families.”

For some of the Councils, they made the decision to leverage others in the community to carry their message. These “messengers” had existing relationships with their target audiences and were already trusted sources of information.

“I think it is mostly about personal outreach. I think you need to be able to talk about it and sound enthusiastic. No doubt you could have some amazing expensive ad campaign and very

expensive materials, but that may not get people in the door.”

Councils disseminate information in many ways.

Almost all of the Councils responding to the survey reported using multiple mechanisms to disseminate their messages. For a few Councils, all of the mechanisms were electronic, including websites, emails, and Facebook. However, for most Councils, they reported using a mix of electronic, in-person, radio, and printed material.

Councils use printed material in many settings.

Many Councils use printed material, with creative means for getting the material to parents, including:

- Sending them home in school folders;
- Posting them at the library, local businesses, and at service delivery providers’ offices;
- Posting in frequently visited locations, including gas stations, grocery stores, and post offices.

Focus group findings indicated that not all locations are equal. In some communities, a grocery store might be a good option, but a gas station would not be. This may not be true in another community.

In addition to their own material, many Councils leverage other printed material, such as newspapers and local chamber of commerce bulletins.

Councils are starting to use social media and heavily use electronic communications in all forms.

Three-quarters of the Councils responding to the survey post their material on their website and two-thirds send emails. Half of the Councils responding to the survey reported using social media to get their messages out to their target audiences. Facebook posts reported by interviewees included educational tips related to parenting young children, links to local resources, photos from events, and invitations to events. Some Councils reported more engagement through Facebook than through their other methods of dissemination.

Some Councils have other dissemination strategies.

While flyers, newspaper, electronic material, and social media were the most common ways to disseminate their messages, some Councils also reported using billboards and other visual mediums (14% of survey respondents), radio (38% of survey

respondents), and direct mail (38% of respondents). For example, one Council uses reminder postcards in the mail to prompt parents to bring the needed information to their appointments.

2. Be consistent.

It is important to maintain regular and consistent communications efforts.²³ One approach highlighted in the literature is to utilize a multi-wave approach with initial contact and then follow-up communication—as a one-time communications blitz may not be enough.²⁴

Councils understand the importance of multiple and regular communications.

Among the Councils interviewed, they reported a combination of one-time and repeated communications. For example, they have monthly communications material that are updated with timely information. They also distribute communications tied to specific program offerings. Between these two types of communications, a lot of information is steadily flowing out into the community. As one Council put it:

“Something is going out every single week; we always have something going out.”

Another Council reported a very purposeful multi-wave approach to communicating about programs:

“We put out ads in the newspaper two weeks before the program starts. Three to four weeks earlier, we advertise on our local radio station, which has a community calendar.”

3. Train your messengers.

If you have a carefully crafted message with specific information, targeted at certain individuals, it is critical to maintain the fidelity of the messaging. Therefore, it is helpful to train whoever is responsible for disseminating the message to ensure consistent and accurate messages are conveyed.²⁵

Councils are not actively training their messengers.

As many Councils are not yet at the point of carefully crafting and testing their messages, it makes sense that few are reporting specific strategies for training messengers. One Council did report that they train home visitation nurses to get their message out.

While other Councils reported using many in-person and one-on-one communications strategies, they did not share information on a process for training their messengers.

4. Piggy-back your messages.

In today's world, there is always the risk of over-saturation of information. Therefore one strategy to get messaging out is to piggy-back on other communications. For example, when sending out a postcard reminder to an individual if they are due or overdue for an appointment, screening, service, etc., also take that opportunity to communicate resources available, the benefits of following-through, or offer scheduling assistance.²⁶

A Council example of piggy-backing their message on other communications opportunities.

Councils have many opportunities to piggy-back information, leveraging the multiple connections their partners have to families with young children. For example, one reported that they share information about screenings when families come in for any type of health service, encouraging them to come back.

5. Leverage your partners.

Getting the word out does not need to be an independent endeavor. In fact the literature suggests that when reaching out to a community, including community partners can only help efforts. Specifically, leveraging community partnerships who are trusted and credible within the community (churches, Parent Teacher Associations, community organizations, etc.) can help spread the message.²⁷ Local health departments can also be a great resource to use when disseminating communications.²⁸

Councils know how to use their partners.

From the interviews, it is clear that Councils understand how to work with partners to disseminate their information and increase participation rates in their programs. For example, they share their material:

- At schools, for students to bring home to their parents;

- At day care centers to pass along to parents;
- Through in-home providers who can take the material to parents;
- Through public agencies, like human services and community mental health centers, to share with clients who have young children; and
- At other service delivery providers, to share with clients who have young children.

Partnering with other organizations and individuals to share their message is not only for the convenience of access to parents with young children. Some Councils also reported understanding the leverage that can be gained by having credible partners share information with families.

"Parents trust their kids with Head Start all day long and Head Start is telling those parents to take their kids to these screenings."

TESTING COMMUNICATIONS MATERIAL

The communications best practice literature highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders when messages and materials are being developed. While many Councils engaged health providers and community organizations, few are currently testing their material directly with their target audiences.

Testing communications material does not need to be complex. As part of the preparation for this brief, four materials were tested through focus groups with the target audience. The steps involved in testing included:

1. Selecting a material to test and identifying its intended audience.
2. Recruiting at least five people who represent the intended audience and who are not already highly familiar with the information/event.
3. Hosting the focus group and asking key questions, such as:
 - Their first reactions to the material, including what draws their attention and why;
 - The most important information on the material and the least important;

- What the information and visuals on the material imply about the event/information included in the resource;
- What information is missing from the material;
- What they would change on the material; and
- Where they would be likely to see the material, and whether some locations would lend more credibility to the material than others.

As a result of this testing process, information was gathered that helped inform the content and design of each messaging material, as well as ideas for how to disseminate it.

The focus group results and *key tips relevant to Council messaging materials* are on the four pages to follow.

TESTING AN INFORMATIONAL RESOURCE: SCHOOL READINESS CALENDAR

Communications and Outreach Material

Informational calendar designed for parents of children (ages 3-5), which provides numerous tips and resources for parents to help young children prepare and thrive in school – from academic support to good health and social emotional development.

Focus Group Participants

6 parents of young children - 5 mothers, 1 father (all Caucasian).

Strengths of the Resource

- Prominent display of logos from credible, local organizations, which highlights that this resource is from a local source.
- Visual presentation inside the calendar. Although there is a lot of information provided, participants noted that it wasn't overwhelming, in part due to the pictures and art inside.
- Information was provided in a variety of ways that resonated with the participants, including tips, checklists, recommended books, local and online resources, and activity ideas.

School Readiness Calendar

First Impressions of Routt County

August 2012 - July 2013



Potential Areas for Improvement

- The front of the calendar needs to more clearly articulate the intended audience and types of content. "School Readiness" was not immediately obvious to the focus group participants as relevant to younger children, nor did it suggest the types of activities and content in the calendar.
- Need for different versions of the resource (both online and hardcopy) and wider distribution, both to increase accessibility.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING RESOURCES

- Carefully consider how the key words and visuals on the front of a resource suggest such things as intended audience and types and variety of content.
- Visibly identify age range of children that the resource addresses.
- Use visuals inside a resource, not just on the cover, to help break-up the content and make it less overwhelming.
- Include target audience feedback in the design phase for critical resources.
- Explore multiple options of increasing the resources distribution and visibility (i.e., online version, availability of calendar at clinics and dentist offices).

TESTING A RECRUITMENT FLYER: EXPLORING FOODS

Communications Material

Flyer inviting families to attend a recreation group on *Exploring Foods*. This group is geared towards young children and their parents and engages children's five senses to get them to learn more about raw fruits and vegetables and to enjoy fruits and vegetables.

Focus Group Participants

5 parents of young children – 4 mothers (2 Hispanics, 2 Caucasians) and a father (Caucasian).

Strengths of the Flyer

- Clearly states key information (the group is FREE, start and end times, appropriate age range).
- Clearly states that this is a learning opportunity related to food.

"First thing I see is a messy child, a very messy child and lots of clothes (need to be) changed."



Cost: FREE

Exploring Foods

Starts: September 25, 2012 (Tuesday ONLY)

Where: Burlington Christian Church corner of 12th and Donelan

Time: 2:00pm to 3:00pm

AGES: 1 Year to 5 Years Old

Children are natural explorers. Exploring foods will have Children learn about food by using their senses: touch, smell, taste, sight, and sound. Allow children to handle food. Also, Children will be learning the shape and texture, and hands-on activities will incorporate physical activity, gross motor skills development, and fine motor skills. Learning about food is a BLAST!!!

The program lasts until **November 27, 2012** Call Prairie Family Center at (719) 346-5398 and get sign-up TODAY!!!!!!



Potential Areas for Improvement

- Use a relevant picture – the picture of a child eating a messy plate of spaghetti mislead participants about the types of food (fruits and veggies), the use of raw foods instead of processed foods, the nutritional focus of the group, and the level of messiness.
- Need more information about who is leading the group and more prominent placement of the name of the program. It would allow for more of a connection/ sense of security in having their children participate in a group.
- Need clarification on whether parents stay with the child or drop their child off.
- Spanish and English flyer had different content and different layout – they should be more alike. However, the child on the flyer in Spanish should not be Caucasian. It was also unclear whether Spanish language translation would be available in the group.
- Visual presentation needs less bolded text and more attractive layout, perhaps more use of fruit and vegetable images.

TIPS FOR RECRUITMENT FLYERS

- Clearly state key information, including time, location, cost, who is hosting the event, and expectations (e.g., age range and whether parents need to attend as well).
- Secure family input before finalizing and distributing. Ask them what information is most important to include on the flyer.
- Ensure the Spanish and English versions provide the same content, but consider varying the visuals to be more relevant to each group. Address whether the group is accessible in both Spanish and English.
- Select visuals that help readers to better understand the event and its benefits. The visual is part of your message, not just there to improve the attractiveness of the flyer.

TESTING A RECRUITMENT FLYER: HEALTHY CHILD CLINIC

Communications Material

Flyer inviting parents with young children to a Healthy Child Clinic, offered quarterly throughout the area. The Healthy Child Clinic provides free health services - from physicals to dental screenings - for young children.

Focus Group Participants

4 parents of young children and 1 sibling - 2 mothers, 2 fathers and 1 older brother (2 Caucasians and 2 Hispanics and 1 Hispanic/Caucasian).

Strengths of the Flyer

- Clearly highlights compelling information for parents – that the clinic is free and will help them keep their children healthy.
- Provides detail on types of screenings available.



Potential Areas for Improvement

- If not everything is free on a flyer that highlights “free” services, make sure to provide sufficient information about the cost of those items that are not free.
- Credibility is important. Consider highlighting the credentials of the people providing the screenings.
- Visual presentation could benefit from streamlining peripheral information (i.e., such as funders of the clinic).
- Provide more detail about the experience that participants will have at the event, such as the length of time it will take or whether snacks will be available for the children.
- Be detail oriented – flyers with typos can hurt credibility.

TIPS FOR RECRUITMENT FLYERS

- Identify what information will be most compelling to your audience – ideally by asking them – and highlight that on your flyers. Sometimes what is most important to your audience may not be what you would assume.
- Be very up front with information about cost, including when not everything is free. If some things are free and others are not, provide enough information that your audience knows the real costs of attending.
- Think about the experience your audience will have at the event. What information do they need to know about that experience to come prepared?
- Edit, edit, edit.

TESTING A RECRUITMENT FLYER: DENTAL SCREENINGS

Communications Material

Flyer inviting families to support their children's good oral health by bringing their children to a free dental screening.

Focus Group Participants

10 mothers of young children –5 Hispanics (3 bilingual and 2 monolingual Spanish speakers) and 5 Caucasians.

Strengths of the Flyer

- Provides helpful information in addition to recruiting for an event (e.g., informs parents that a dental check should be every six months).
- Uses positive framing – it encourages parents to help keep their children's teeth healthy.
- Clearly states that the dental screenings are free.

Free Children's Dental Screenings

Every Month

Screenings are for children ages
18 and under who are not currently
under the care of a dentist or who have
not seen a dentist in the last 6 months

Help Keep Your Children's Teeth Healthy!



Cavity Free at 3 Materials are provided to you through a
partnership of the Early Childhood Council of Yuma,
Washington, & Kit Carson Counties, the Rural Communities
Resource Center Oral Health Project, and Baby Bear Hugs
Funded By: the Colorado Trust and the
Caring for Colorado Foundation

**PLEASE CALL FOR MORE
INFORMATION OR
TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT**
**Rural Communities
Resource Center
204 S. Main St.
Yuma CO 80759
Telephone: 970-848-3867**
**Washington County
Connections
252 W. 1st St.
Akron CO 80720
Telephone: 970-332-2225**

Potential Areas for Improvement

- The recruitment flyer needs to overcome some of the barriers to attending the screening. It should include:
 - Information that will instill comfort in parents about the type of experience their child will have.
 - Information on why it is important that children receive dental screening at a young age.
 - Clarification on what is included in a screening and what is not.
- Credibility is important. The flyer should clearly identify the host/organizer of the screening. Highlighting the funder is not needed for credibility.
- Visual presentation needs to be more eye-catching and visually appealing. Rather than cartoons, consider a photo from a similar event.

TIPS FOR RECRUITMENT FLYERS

- Some audience members of recruitment flyers may have expectations or assumptions about the type of event. The flyer must provide enough information to overcome any negative assumptions and clarify any expectations that could lead to confusion when they attend the event.
- Cartoons are fun, but not informative. Rather than using cartoons to make an event that may be intimidating seem more accessible, use photos from a similar event to build a better understanding of the event. Make sure the photos are as representative as possible of the full demographic spectrum of your target audience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many Councils have strong communications practices in place, but there is also significant room for improvement when comparing current Council practices to best practices in communications. The following recommendations are directed toward the Councils:

Recommendation 1: Plan first, write second, and disseminate purposefully.

The best practices literature on communications provides a clear process for planning and preparing high quality messages and disseminating them to the desired target audiences.

While many Councils demonstrated skills and processes in place for one or more best practices within these three areas of planning, writing and disseminating communications, overall the Councils are not engaging in the full process. Many Councils were focused on writing material, with less effort in the planning process. Other Councils have put tremendous effort into the dissemination of material, but more up front planning and careful preparation would facilitate success.

To improve overall communications processes and their outcomes, Councils should more purposefully go through the process of planning their material prior to writing them and preparing for dissemination.

Recommendation 2: Localize materials whenever possible.

Many Councils reported examples of localizing materials. There is clearly knowledge and capacity for using local data, stories, pictures, and context to ensure material will resonate. However, most Councils reported using some material that are not adapted to their community. Given the knowledge and capacity for adaptation, this is an area where more could be done.

Recommendation 3: Develop a persuasive message and train others to disseminate it.

Many Councils are experts at leveraging their partners, as they distribute their printed material through partner agencies and work with partners to engage parents in one-on-one conversations. However, only one Council reported training their partners to carry their message.

For some Councils, this may come from not having a clearly articulated message that goes beyond invitations to participate in programs and events. As Councils seek to improve their communications practices, two steps could be implemented together – 1) to be more purposeful about the development of powerful messages for their target audiences and 2) to train their partners to deliver the messages.

Recommendation 4: Prior to disseminating communications material, test them with your target audiences.

The focus group process that was used to test the four different messaging materials generated specific, actionable information that can improve the quality of each of the communications material. The feedback from family members helped clarify the information that was critical to include, the impact of visual images, and where to disseminate the material for the greatest impact.

Given how immediately useful this type of feedback can be, it may be worth the time and effort for Councils to ask for feedback individually or in focus groups from their target audiences prior to disseminating key material. If Councils develop more purposeful messages that cross multiple materials, this will be even more critical.

Recommendation 5: Ensure consistency and relevancy in messaging across multiple mediums.

Survey feedback and the more targeted key informant interviews with a smaller group of Councils indicated that many of the Councils creatively used multiple mediums of

communications to reach a wider audience. However, family feedback in the message-testing focus groups demonstrated that the portrayal of services and programs across different mediums (i.e., Facebook versus a flyer) was inconsistent, leading to confusion regarding the purpose of a program.

In order to optimize the benefits of multiple mediums of communications, materials that are distributed electronically and through hard copy should be cross-walked to ensure the message is consistent and the information is accurate.

Recommendation 6:

Pick your visuals carefully – they should provide information, not just look good.

During the message testing focus groups, family members shared that visuals can be misleading or fail to provide helpful information. Visuals were seen as most effective in relationship to the larger resource material, where they helped to break up blocks of information. When flyers included visuals that were not demographically representative of the target audience, the family focus group members were quick to mention this disconnect.

Visuals are communications tools, not just presentation tools. In other words, picking the visual that says the most is more important than the visual that looks the best. Whenever possible, use visuals from the actual event or similar events, visuals that show local people, and visuals that directly relate to the content being provided. Be careful of visuals that may introduce expectations that do not match the planned event or the types of content in your resource materials.

In addition, any visuals used on/or to support marketing materials should be reflective the demographics of the audience.

Recommendation 7:

Identify and track the outcomes of your communications material.

Some Councils reported outcomes associated with specific communications material, such as referrals to their programs and services. Defining clear outcomes for communications material and tracking whether they are achieved can help improve the effectiveness of an overall communications strategy. For those outcomes that can be tracked with minimal additional resources, it is highly recommended that a tracking system be in place. For example, when parents attend a class or program, the sign-in sheet can ask where they learned about it.

CONCLUSION

Among the Early Childhood Councils participating in The Colorado Trust's Early Childhood Health Integration Strategy, there are numerous examples of best practices in communications and messaging, providing a rich opportunity for shared learning. Councils that are particularly skilled at the dissemination of their communications and messaging material, for example, could provide peer support to other Councils that struggle in this area.

The results of the data collection and analysis also demonstrated gaps in communications and messaging best practices such as securing the feedback of the target audience during the design phase of developing communications and messaging material. This brief is intended to provide some concrete and easy to implement steps for strengthening communications and messaging practices, as well as, serve as a resource in leveraging learning in this area across Councils.

The findings and recommendations of the brief are also encapsulated in an *accompanying tip sheet*, which serves as a user friendly tool to apply these recommendations.

Want practical tips to take action on the information in this brief? Visit: www.sparkpolicy.com/ECC

The tip sheet and brief are part of the Early Childhood Health Integration evaluation of The Colorado Trust. Visit www.coloradotrust.org for more information.

ENDNOTES WITH REFERENCES

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