# WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM SUCCESSFUL POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE IN COFP COMMUNITIES

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Policy and systems change is necessary to confront the root causes of social issues and inequities that negatively impact the health and wellbeing of our local communities. Addressing these social issues (i.e. substance misuse, violence, housing insecurity, food insecurity, etc.) leads communities towards experiencing positive health outcomes, more community connectedness, and safer, more stable communities. Policy and systems change is complex and challenging, but it can be done, as demonstrated in three communities across Colorado. However, change doesn't happen out of thin air. This work takes time, persistence, and a variety of tactics. The findings in this report can be used to inform future policy and systems change work at the local level.

In the fall of 2023, representatives of the Community Organizing for Prevention (COFP) evaluation team at the University of Colorado interviewed local changemakers across three Colorado communities to learn more about what contributed to their successful policy and systems change initiatives. Some of these individuals were members of local coalitions, some were a part of specific workgroups, and some were involved in other ways. Many people from across multiple sectors, including parents and youth, contributed to the overall success of these efforts. These individuals represented different ages, racial/ethnic groups, sectors, and identity backgrounds. Taken together, these perspectives told a broader story about what contributed to successful policy and systems change efforts in their community.

# BACKGROUND

The focus of policy and systems change efforts varied across each unique community. The focuses of these efforts included:

1. Addressing the lack of quality (and/or) affordable childcare in their community by developing a new nonprofit organization to recruit and retain high quality licensed childcare providers.

2. Addressing disproportionate rates of health outcomes in youth by expanding their school board's policy around comprehensive health education.

3. Passing and implementing an accommodation tax that will help fund community improvement projects to address local housing needs.

While the focus of these policy and systems change efforts varied across communities, each community rose up to address a need or a gap that had been negatively impacting particular groups in their community. These negative impacts can lead to health inequities among individuals and groups, affecting a community's overall health and economic wellbeing. Addressing these outcomes through local policy and systems change can help to prevent these negative health impacts, leading to healthier and more stable communities.

# WHAT FACTORS DID THE RESEARCH IDENTIFY AS LEADING TO SUCCESSFUL LOCAL POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE?

## You must know and use your "Why".

It is important to know the reasons behind *why* you need to change a policy or system, and to organize all your activities around this purpose. Using your purpose to guide your efforts will help engage and motivate others to act on the issue of focus. It can also help send a message to the community that policy and systems change at the local level can impact the health and wellbeing of community members.

## Do your research.

It's important to develop an understanding of various factors within the community (historical and present), as well as the processes needed to create change to make this work so you can get it "close to right" from the start:

- Examine what has been done in the past around the issue of focus, or around similar issues. Develop a picture of what collaboration around issues in the community has looked like in the past. Determine what has or hasn't worked in the past to address various community issues moving forward.

- Identify who is doing what around the issue of focus, who is involved in related issues, what resources exist within your community that can support or advance your efforts, and what gaps exist to address the issue (e.g. business restrictions, community understanding around the issue, trust between organizations and/or members of the community who are necessary to engage in order for the efforts to be successful). Doing so will alleviate some tensions and help advance collective impact work within the community.

- Figure out the processes and best practices to get the policy or system changed. This could include researching model policy language, understanding how to ask for a vote, determining what needs to be provided to a decision-making board, figuring out how to get a measure on a ballot, and educating others on these topics.

**It is imperative that an equity lens is used when making policy and systems changes.**

To ensure that your proposed policy or systems change initiative does not perpetuate or further harm to members of your community, it is important that you use an equity lens from the start. Do research around who is impacted most by the absence of the proposed policy or systems change being in effect, but also spend time up front examining which members of the community will be most impacted by the proposed policy or systems change initiative (i.e. those of a particular race, ethnicity, ability status, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic area, etc.). This will help lead to positive and equitable health outcomes for all community members.

# Communicate,
# be transparent, be seen.

## Tailor your communications.

Successful policy and systems change at the local level requires that a number of groups in the community are not only aware of, but act around the issue of focus. Each of these groups requires communications that are tailored to their values, capacities, underlying beliefs, and views around the issue.

- **Elected officials:**

    These individuals are needed to support and advocate for action to be taken around the policy or systems change effort. Oftentimes, they are the individuals who hold the most legitimate power to be able to change a policy or system.

- **Local organizations or system entities (such as a school board):**

    Often these groups are needed to work together to be effective. Without buy-in and engagement from all relevant groups, the policy or systems change effort will face more barriers to success, or even fail outright.

    - Collaboration and collective impact can be a challenging process. Keeping the "common goal" and the "why" at the forefront can help break down silos that exist inherently within local communities.

- **General public or defined community:**

    Creating awareness around the issue for the public or defined community can help garner more support around the initiative. An example of a defined community could be a school community, which might consist of parents, youth, teachers, and administrators.

    - It is important to provide education and awareness around how the social issue of focus disproportionately affects certain members of the community. For example, in a community that has yet to implement a comprehensive health education requirement for all students across a district, it would be important for members of the school community to be made aware that only certain students have access to this education, while others don't. It would also be important to build awareness around the fact that research shows that students who have access to comprehensive health education programs experience lower rates of negative physical and behavioral health outcomes *(cite MOS)*. Doing so will help ensure that community members understand why the proposed policy or systems change effort is important to the overall health and well-being of the community.

    - It is also important to provide education and awareness around specific concerns a community might have around how the policy or systems change effort will impact them financially. For example, a community might be concerned about having to pay additional taxes with the passing of an accommodation tax. It would be important for community members to know that only visitors to the community pay that accommodation tax. People are more likely to support efforts when they understand that their finances will not be negatively impacted by the change.

## Policy and systems change requires financial investment.

Paying staff and consultants for their time and expertise was critical.

Equally important were financial investments in:

- **Subject matter experts:**
  Funding staff or professionals who have specialized training and knowledge around topics that are important to the policy and systems change effort (e.g., people who can speak to specifics around the issue being addressed, folks who are knowledgeable about the policy process, education and outreach experts, marketing campaign experts, etc.)

- **Process matter experts:**
  Funding people who have the skills needed to carry out various aspects of the policy and systems change process (e.g., someone to help organize people and build momentum, someone to help with conflict resolution if needed). Not investing in these types of supports was seen as a major barrier to successful policy and systems change efforts.

- *Expertise of those with lived experience:*
  Compensating the time and expertise of those from the community who are most burdened and impacted by the issue is critical. Their involvement and perspectives are crucial to the success and sustainability of the policy and systems change effort.

Planning for financial investment in these areas will help alleviate turnover and burnout. Policy and systems change work can be slow and difficult, and people are often asked or expected to do too much while also juggling other work/life priorities.

## Trust plays a key factor in engagement and advocacy.

People in the community who are most impacted by the issue of focus are more likely to become engaged in policy and systems change efforts if they trust others who are actively involved in the process.

- It doesn't stop there. When trusted leaders shared the platform with members of the community who were most impacted by the issue of focus, these individuals brought their passion, stories and personal connections to the efforts, bolstering and driving efforts towards success.

- Ensure due diligence in setting up financial compensation for the involvement of those most impacted by the issue of focus. They are experts in their own lived experience and should be compensated as such.

- To include representative and diverse voices, be more intentional about scheduling meetings that take into consideration people's work schedules, levels of trust and safety with representatives of various community agencies and organizations, transportation, childcare, and any basic needs (e.g., food/diet, restroom needs, etc.). It's important to make sure these details are included in your planning, as well as your budget.

### There will be bumps in the road.

Change is inherently challenging for many individuals, groups and organizations. This can be due to a lack of awareness or education around a proposed change, or it might mean that an organization might need to adjust their workplan, or that resources might move from one part of the community to another. This change, or even the idea of it, can take time to adjust to and accept. Anticipate tensions and interpersonal or interorganizational conflicts as part of the work. Think through processes that can be put in place to alleviate these in advance.

### Keep the momentum alive.

A singular policy or systems change can have ripple effects on other policy and systems changes that can occur. For example, a ballot measure on tax increase to additional dwelling units can lead to educating the broader community on the benefits on long-term rental vs. short-term rentals, which can also lead to a conversation around the possibility of the development of a homeless shelter in the future. Keep a finger on the pulse of where there is excitement, energy, and engagement that could be leveraged for additional future policy and systems change efforts.

### Celebrate the policy change, but don't stop there.

Advocate for and monitor equitable implementation of the policy after it passes. This may involve collaborating with a different group than the one you worked with to get the policy changed, as sometimes the implementation of a policy requires a different set of actors and resources. Offer support to help build out what implementation will look like while ensuring equity remains a priority.