



Communications Planning by Change Agents:

How has communications furthered the goals of UHI campaigns? What issues should be considered before developing a comprehensive communications plan? What are some of the different views of the nature and value of communication efforts?

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About the Urban Health Initiative

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) established the Urban Health Initiative (UHI) in 1995 to determine whether a concerted, collaborative effort can bring about region-wide improvements in multiple measures of youth health and safety. Five campaigns comprise the UHI:

- Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign
- Mayor's Time (aka The Youth Connection of Greater Metropolitan Detroit)
- Safe Passages (Oakland)
- Philadelphia Safe and Sound
- Youth Matters (Richmond)

UHI campaigns work to implement proven strategies at such a large scale that citywide statistics will improve significantly. To do that, UHI campaigns must be change agents to secure systemic policy and fiscal changes necessary to get strategies to that scale. The UHI was designed to be non-prescriptive, allowing communities to craft implementation plans based on local conditions without assumptions, mandates or imperatives set forward by RWJF.

The National Program Office (NPO), based in Seattle, provides guidance, technical assistance and oversight to the local UHI campaigns in a number of areas, including research, management, systems change and communications. The NPO also helps campaigns attract and develop the local leaders essential to bring about and sustain change in their cities. Former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer is national program director.

About the UHI's Lessons Learned Project

The UHI campaigns and NPO have learned many lessons with regard to developing change agent organizations, and securing and sustaining change in large cities. The NPO is working to catalogue these lessons so they can be put to use by the campaigns in the final years of the UHI, and so they can benefit future change agent organizations and their funders. Several topics have been covered. All papers can be found on the UHI's website, www.urbanhealth.org. More topics will be covered in the coming months.

All papers should be considered works in progress. The UHI is not yet complete, and many individuals who have been heavily involved with the UHI have yet to be interviewed. As new or different insights are gathered on a topic, the papers will be redrafted and reprinted. Anyone who has comments, suggestions or questions about the UHI Lessons Learned Project or individual topics can contact Jerry VanderWood, UHI Director of Communications, at 206-616-3692 or jerryvw@u.washington.edu.

Communications Planning by Change Agents

By Jerry VanderWood¹

With regard to communications, there has not been much common understanding among the local UHI sites and between the sites and the NPO about what it is, what it can do to help achieve outcome goals, and how to do it.

The Foundation and NPO feel a change agent should use communications just as if it were involved in a political campaign: a change agent is campaigning, for example, to give all its city's kids access to after-school opportunities. The UHI's core values states, "A sophisticated communications campaign is key to increasing the prominence of youth health and safety issues, and creating and sustaining momentum for change."

"If you want to mobilize communities and bring people together in a broad enough coalition to effect the kind of change you want to make, you need to understand perception – how are people talking about these issues – just as you do when you are running for office. That way, you can craft some messages that will change those perceptions if they are wrong headed or will end the mismatch between what people think and what is actually going on. Then you change behavior in a system, and to do that you have to change perceptions in the system and in the constituency. The only way to do that is with a communications strategy. Ultimately, if the level of systems change needed is to come about, some elected person at some level of government will have to raise up their hands in public and make a decision. The development of a constituency of support for that decision needs to occur before that vote takes place."

-Charles Royer, National Program Director

"It goes back to the issue of scale. If you want to bring about change on that order of magnitude, then you have to reach tens of thousands of kids with whatever intervention you pursue. In order to do that, you need policy change, and to do that it's essentially a political process. So in my mind communications was to make the health and well being of kids a higher priority for the public – a hearts and minds objective."

-Paul Jellinek, former Vice President, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

UHI sites have and are using communications strategies, albeit not always in a comprehensive "hearts and minds" strategy but often in effective and strategic ways. For example, much of Philadelphia Safe and Sound's data work, particularly the Report Card and Children's Budget described in the paper, *Using data in a change agent's decision-making process*, doubles as a bona fide communications effort. These data tools were created with their communications value fully in mind.

Also, The Youth Connection joined forces with Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick to create Mayor's Time. In addition to securing the policy and financial changes necessary to dramatically expand after-school participation in Detroit, Mayor's Time's *raison d'être* is to communicate the value and availability of after-school programs. After-school enrollment appears to be going up, in part due to the Mayor's Time after-school fair and other communication tactics.

Communications within a systems change plan

There is wide agreement that as a whole the UHI sites did not employ communications in the manner and/or timeframe envisioned by the UHI originators. One of the reasons cited for this parallels the discussion about data: after an extended period of planning that was often characterized by confusion about mission, it took completing the denominator exercise for most sites to understand the magnitude of scale and to see themselves as change agents (see the *Using data paper* for a description of the denominator exercise).

Just as the sites struggled with completing their overall systems change plans, they struggled with developing an appropriate, complementary communications plan. In some instances it became a cart-before-the-horse situation: sites had not completed a systems change plan and so therefore did not have the foundation for a communications plan, but some did implement communications strategies primarily because they felt it was something they were supposed to do. These efforts inevitably faded without having much effect because they were not attached to a systems change plan.

“The sites saw communications as another thing on a checklist we had. They didn’t understand the reasons for it, because they fundamentally didn’t understand what they were to achieve. They didn’t understand scale, until they did the denominator exercise. Once they did that, some began to understand how to use communications. The Philadelphia Report Card – that’s the sort of thing we were looking for, the sort of thing that would raise the questions like are we doing the things we should be doing for kids, and begin to create the political consensus among voters that we ought to be doing more for kids.”

-Paul Jellinek, former Vice President, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Another factor was that the initial site staff leaders were by and large from the direct services/social services field. The political campaign metaphor did not resonate with some of them in the early part of the initiative. Then the denominator exercise, and the clarity it brought regarding the magnitude of the scale that was to be reached, made the campaign metaphor more meaningful. But because the executive directors’ extensive experience did not include much involvement with political campaigns or multi-faceted communications strategies, in general they did not apply communications to the extent that UHI originators had expected.

“These initiatives are about social services, and in that world the idea of communications is foreign. It has changed dramatically during the last few years, but it was foreign at that time.”

-Denise Clayton, Deputy Director, Philadelphia Safe and Sound

The sites believe they would have benefited from more assistance, including help to understand the campaign metaphor and exposure to more pertinent examples of the communications strategies.

“We didn’t understand communications in the early period, we weren’t there. Maybe it wasn’t said right. For people who were complete novices, we probably needed something more basic to help us understand. In the abstract, it was hard to comprehend.”

-Naomi Post, former Executive Director, Philadelphia Safe and Sound

The NPO agrees and believes it should have been more prescriptive about, and provided the sites more training for, strategic planning. Plus, the systems change and communications plans should have been developed together. The planning period should conclude with the submission of a systems change plan; integrated within that plan should be a political communications plan.

This, in fact, is one of the key lessons: The NPO should guide this process through significant, hands-on technical assistance with regard to strategic planning as well as finding and working with communications professionals.

Differing opinions regarding communications

Site leaders had difficulty finding, and in some cases working with, the staff and consultants who could analyze a site's goal and objectives and provide the requisite strategic communications planning and technical expertise. In some cases sites hired communications people who were competent but didn't have the appropriate type or level of experience needed – particularly experience developing a strategic communications campaign that marries the fundamentals of a political communications plan with the site's systems change plan. In others there were cultural mismatches; staff from the social services had trouble relating to the “slick” communications consultants. All sites experienced significant amounts of churning with regard to communications staff and consultants.

Also, there are differences of opinion regarding the need for a comprehensive communications campaign and with the applicability of the political campaign metaphor.

For example, for a time leaders in Oakland believed that a comprehensive communications/ political campaign wasn't necessary; they didn't need to influence the decision-makers because the decision-makers are on the Safe Passages Board and have committed to systemic change. To them it was less a matter of building a political campaign and more a matter of ensuring that the systemic changes that they have agreed to are embraced within their bureaucracies.

“If you're trying to build a movement where you're just trying to get the whole population involved around something, then you have a different strategy. But if you're trying to align the battleship with the cruiser and the aircraft carrier without crushing the tugboats in between, then it's a more technical approach.”

-Dave Kears, Director, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency
and Safe Passages board Co-chair

Others believe that the UHI effort is fundamentally different than a traditional political campaign, that an ideals- and values-based effort like the UHI has more complicating factors than a campaign to elect a flesh-and-blood individual. In this view, it hasn't been a lack of understanding of the value of communications; the difficulty has been in finding a consultant who “gets” the site (not the other way around). These consultants often couldn't understand the nature of the sites' work and would miss the mark by proposing, for example, plans to “brand” the organizations rather than communication strategies to help the sites reach their outcome goals.

Resources and other constraints

Insufficient resources are mentioned as a barrier to implementing a comprehensive communications campaign. Sites report that it has been difficult to raise money for communications, although some have had success doing so. And RWJF grant funding, given the cost of site operations, covered a significant amount of communications cost, but not at a level of saturation that one would expect in a political campaign.

Outside constraints have been felt by some sites. Lead agencies, with their own notions of and experiences with communications, hampered some sites' communications efforts. For example, Philadelphia Safe and Sound was originally housed in the City government. Some city agencies felt that a communications campaign sponsored by Safe and Sound would compete with their own. Also, some sites felt constrained by forces other than a lead agency:

“We were afraid as a group of threatening the existing structure, and that a heavy presence through communications would be perceived as a threat. I think when you have an outside entity as in Richmond with the Chamber of Commerce sending a very different message to the human services delivery community, you have much more opportunity and much more likelihood of success from communications than when you have the people directly involved trying to preach to other people directly involved.”

-George Musgrove, former Assistant City Manager, Oakland,
and former Safe Passages Board member

Foundation financial support for the sites began to ramp down with four years left to go in the initiative, and sites were charged with raising their own, primarily local, operational funds. As the ramp down of RWJF funding began, some sites were faced with competition in the marketplace from within their own organizations. The ramp down necessitated fundraising efforts, and sites now have the dual challenge of implementing communication strategies that support their systems change/political strategies as well as implementing communications strategies that facilitate fundraising. For the political communications, the sites often remain “behind the scenes”, putting the issues front and center. Fundraising communications require that the organization be out front. Keeping two distinct communication objectives in mind, and sometimes implementing two separate communications plans, is a challenge.

It seems that where a site begins in relation to the power structure of the city affects whether and how sites employ communications. As noted, Oakland's view on communications is shaped by the “insider” track it takes to systems change, and Philadelphia was hindered by its placement within city government, but later became a 501(c)(3) and did not have those constraints.

Detroit, compared to the other sites, started from a spot most distant from the power structure of the city. Its lead agency was not involved in systems change work, and initially the mayor, while supportive of The Youth Connection, did not make it a priority of his administration. Detroit's communication campaign – called “Participate 3 to 8” – was an attempt to raise the salience of the issue of after-school programming, and it also helped establish The Youth Connection as a policy expert with regard to after-school issues. This, in turn, helped The Youth Connection get the attention of the new mayor during the campaign (although relationship-building by its board was also a large factor), and Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and The Youth Connection formed a partnership that ultimately led to joining forces around after-school programming. The new entity, Mayor's Time, was born.

The problem of competition with others in the marketplace hindered Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign in a different way. Safe and Sound created a communications campaign with the tagline, "Who Says It Can't Be Done?" The plan was developed after survey and focus group research showed, among other things, that despite a negative view on the conditions for kids in the city, residents had a hopeful and "can-do" attitude. Safe and Sound and its partners invested about \$1.5 million in the campaign, which was connected to the site's strategies (home visitation, etc.) as it offered these strategies as proven approaches that could change the negative conditions. However, Baltimore's Mayor Martin O'Malley also created a communications campaign, called the "Believe" campaign, that was somewhat similar in tone to Safe and Sound's plan. Safe and Sound decided to pull back on its campaign. Although the "Who Says it Can't be Done?" campaign was stunted, this story continues to unfold. Safe and Sound, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Mayor O'Malley and other partners are now working together through the new Reason to Believe Enterprise, announced in May 2003. Among the rationale for creating Reason to Believe is the belief that the mayor's Believe campaign is an important awareness-raising effort, and that Safe and Sound and its partners promote the solutions to the issues raised by the mayor. Reason to Believe is committed to raising \$30 million in private funds to be applied to intervention strategies; already more than \$25 million has been raised.

"The 'Believe' campaign opened people's eyes to things they really didn't want to see, and we needed to do that. Reason to Believe is the next logical step. Now, we're opening people's eyes to the positive things that they can not only believe in, but build on."

-Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley in a press release

Summary points

1. Change agents should culminate the planning phase with development of a strategic systems change plan. Within this plan should be a communications strategy – employing best practice political communications techniques – to help achieve the site's goals.
2. The NPO should provide significant training and technical assistance to the sites with regard to strategic, systems change planning, including the incorporation of communications strategies within sites' systems change plans.
3. An experienced political communications expert, either on staff or under contract, should be a key member of a change agent's leadership team.
4. Depending on circumstances unique to its city and organization, a change agent may face impediments to implementing a comprehensive communication effort. Some impediments could be:
 - Skill set mismatches
 - Competition within the marketplace of ideas
 - Insufficient resources
 - Competing communication needs, such as service delivery dollars and organizational fundraising
5. Other factors, such as lead agencies and the nature of the change agent's relationship with the power base of the city, can impact whether and how it employs a comprehensive communications campaign.

The following individuals have been interviewed as part of the UHI's lessons learned project. Interviews with many other individuals involved with the UHI will be held over the following year. The author wishes to thank all interviewees for their time and insights.

Freddie G. Burton, Jr., Wayne County Probate Judge; Board Chair, Mayor's Time
Dennis Chaconas, former Superintendent, Oakland Unified School District; former Board Vice Chair, Safe Passages
Denise Clayton, Deputy Director, Philadelphia Safe and Sound
Susan Crump, Vice President, United Way Services, Advisory Board Member, Youth Matters
Cindy Curreri, National Program Deputy Director, Urban Health Initiative
Grenae Dudley, Executive Director, Mayor's Time
Jim Dunn, President and CEO, Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce (lead agency for Youth Matters)
Mike Evans, Director, Human Services, City of Richmond; Member, Advisory Board Executive Committee, Youth Matters
Hathaway Ferebee, Executive Director, Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign
Jeff Griffith, Communication's Director, Mayor's Time
Jeriel Heard, Associate Director, Mayor's Time
Linda Herzog, National Program Associate Director, Urban Health Initiative
Michael M. Howe, President, East Bay Community Foundation (lead agency for Safe Passages)
Martha Holleman, Director of Policy and Planning, Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign
Paul Jellinek, Principal, Isaacs/Jellinek; former Vice President, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Ernest Jones, President and CEO, Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation; Board Chair, Philadelphia Safe and Sound
David Kears, Director, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency; Board Chair, Safe Passages
Jon King, President and CEO, Exclusive Staffing Companies; Advisory Board Chair, Youth Matters
Jo Ann Lawer, President and CEO, Philadelphia Safe and Sound
Floyd Morris, Senior Program Officer, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
George Musgrove, former Oakland Assistant City Manager; former Board member, Safe Passages
Tony Nazzario, MIS/Data Manager, Philadelphia Safe and Sound
Mae O'Brien, Director of Institutional Advancement, Philadelphia Safe and Sound
Laura Pinkney, former Executive Director, Safe Passages
Naomi Post-Street, Consultant; UHI Fellow; former Executive Director, Philadelphia Safe and Sound
Charles Royer, National Program Director, Urban Health Initiative
Rush Russell, President, Children's Futures; former Senior Program Officer, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Lisa Specter, Executive Director, Smart Smiles, Boys and Girls Club of Greater Richmond; former Deputy Director, Youth Matters
Veronica Templeton, former Executive Director, Youth Matters
Michael Tenbusch, CEO, Think Detroit; UHI Fellow
Phil Wells, Deputy Director, Mayor's Time
Robin Wood, Deputy Director, Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign
Marsha Zibalese-Crawford, Associate Professor, Temple University; Consultant, Philadelphia Safe and Sound

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