Grassroots Movement Building: What it is, Why it matters

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What is a Grassroots Public Health Movement?

• An organized effort to prevent disease or other threats to the health and safety of individuals and the community.

• Led by activated citizens and organizations that devote resources to building grassroots capacity.

• Usually built around a single issue or concern that energizes individuals who join in common cause.
Grassroots Movement defined

- “Grassroots movement building means that residents and those who are **directly impacted** by an issue are ... making change and taking leadership.”

- “[I]t’s not just one local community struggling through that but our struggles are related, connected; and that we have a broad view about how to move a landscape in fixing the conditions that are similar....”

- “When a community through community organizing or through other organic processes achieves the **epiphany of power** or self determination, that's the moment that you have a grassroots movement.”

  - PMB, Key Informant Interviews 2010
Building a Successful Grassroots Movement

- Grassroots Strategy
- Grassroots Leadership
- Communication
- Capacity
- Resources
Success Factors

- Grassroots Strategy
  - The Rule of Thirds:
    - Energize the third that are with you
    - Reach out to the middle
  - Stepwise, not incremental

- Grassroots Leadership
  - Leadership development
  - Trust and loyalty

- Capacity
  - Hands-on grassroots experience
  - List management
  - Old media, new media

- Communications
  - Internal: The vertical conversation
  - Media advocacy

- Money: The two-edged sword
Waiting for Godot: The Role of Science in Building Grassroots Health Movements

• “[T]here may be little correlation between the scientific grounding of health related social movements and their success in the policy or public arenas.

• “Publications in the Journal of the American Medical Association or the New England Journal of Medicine, however sound, are seldom persuasive on their own.

• “Movement success in reaching the policy agenda may be only tangentially related to the scientific importance of its public health message, and movements with important messages may fail.”

Benefits of Grassroots Movement Building

- Power
  - Policy Change
    - Innovation
  - Social Norms Change
    - Compliance
    - Trust
      - Social Capitol
  - Diversity
- Public Education
- Civic Engagement
- Capacity
- Sustainability
The Power of Grassroots Public Health

- Grassroots movement building can empower public health to make fundamental policy changes at the local, state and federal levels
- Resisting unacceptable policy compromises and balancing the power of harm-causing industries

- Environmental prevention: Lasting changes in physical and social environments
- Local officials often interact directly with their constituents, making them more accountable, and the opponents of public health are less welcome outside of DC and the state capitols
Movement Building and Social Change

- Allowed to grow, grassroots movements and the public dialogue they engender can spark a chain reaction of policy education and social norms change.

- “Local control is at the heart of our broader goal of educating the public ... and changing social norms. Debates over proposed local smokefree ordinances typically generate extensive media coverage, letters to the editor, town hall meetings, and city council hearings, all of which increase public awareness of secondhand smoke and public support for smokefree laws.”

- Grassroots campaigns, even if they are initially unsuccessful, can increase awareness of a health issue, build community readiness for policy change, and lead to healthier social norms.
The Impact of Preemption on Grassroots Movement Building

- Preemption has a *negative impact* on grassroots movement building.

- By taking away “the ability of people to make [local] policies” – preemption can “take the wind out of the sails very quickly.”

- “[T]here's far less incentive for people to organize and act because they don't have an opportunity to take action at the local level.”

- “[O]ne of the biggest detriments to building grassroots is people answering you saying, ‘There isn’t anything we can do about that.’ [So if] the government has already said, ‘You’re right, you can’t do anything about this,’ then I’m much less likely to be able to move them to action.”

- PMB Key Informant Interviews 2010
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