2022-2023 UTAH PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY NEEDS

Survey & Key Informant Interviews

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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Get Healthy Utah received funding from the Utah Cancer Action Network to explore policy-related needs and attitudes of the public health workforce in Utah. From January 2023 to June 2023, Get Healthy Utah disseminated a survey to public health professionals across the state. During the same timeframe, Get Healthy Utah staff conducted nine separate key informant interviews with twelve individuals. The results of the survey and interviews help to paint a picture of the successes, challenges, facilitators, and barriers that influence public health policy work in the state of Utah.

The goal of this project is to understand and thereby improve the capacity of Utah's public health workforce to engage effectively in policy change--both on the local and state level. The ramifications are significant, as policies can significantly influence the social determinants of health. They shape the conditions in which people live, work, learn, and play, and impact access to healthy food, active living, and healthcare. This in turn impacts the health outcomes of community members and their ability to prevent and manage disease.

Understanding the policy-related needs of public health professionals is essential to provide the most relevant and effective trainings, resources, and support. As the public health workforce grows into its full capacity to influence policy, the health and quality of life of Utahns will improve.

POLICY SURVEY
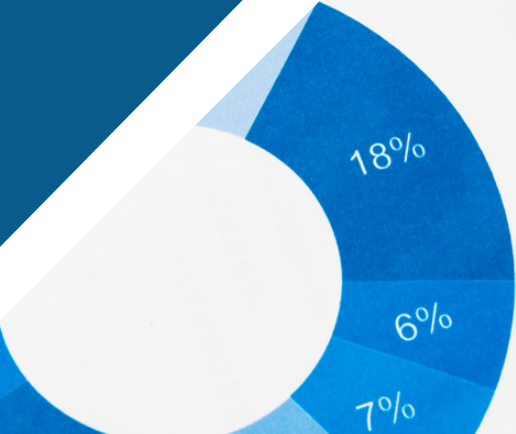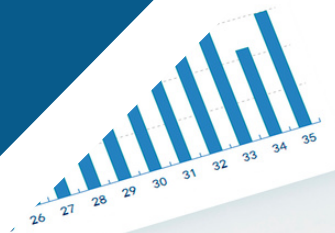
SURVEY
DEMOGRAPHICS

In January 2023, Get Healthy Utah created a survey to assess the attitudes and needs of public health professionals in Utah regarding policy work. The survey was disseminated widely and open to responses from January 2023 to May 2023.

Respondents

122 total responses
- **57** responses from local health departments
- **23** responses from Utah Department of Health and Human Services
- **18** responses from universities and colleges
  - University of Utah, Utah State University, Salt Lake Community College
- **10** responses from healthcare organizations
  - Intermountain Health, PEHP Health & Benefits, Association for Utah Community Health, Healthy Choice Utah, Cambria Health Solutions, Sacred Circle Healthcare, etc.
- **15** responses from others
  - Children's Service Society of Utah, Canyons School District, Utah Health Policy Project, etc.

Public Health Experience

Question: How long have you worked in public health?

I do not work in public health 6% (7)
15+ years 20% (24)
10-15 years 8% (10)
5-10 years 24% (29)
1-5 years 43% (52)
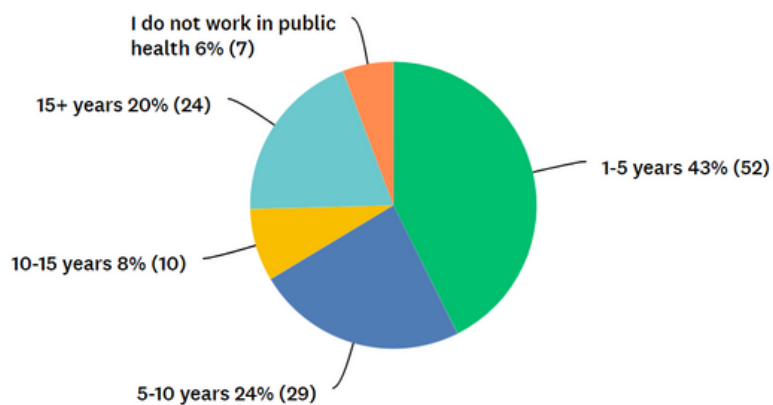
Counties Represented

Question: What county do you work in?

Washington
Box Elder
SLCo Cache
Utah County
State Salt Lake County
Davis Utah Salt Lake County
Summit Uintah Weber

Number of mentions
fewer 1 ... 10 more

ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY

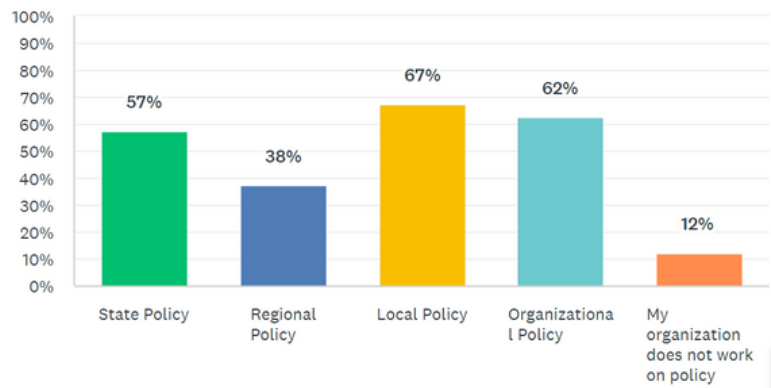For this survey, public health policy was defined broadly, as a system of guidelines adopted and implemented by a government or organization to influence health. Policy work could be informal or formal and could occur at different levels and contexts. This includes state, regional, local, and organizational policy.

Question: Is your organization currently engaged in policy work?

- Unsure 10% (10)
- No 10% (10)
- Yes 80% (81)
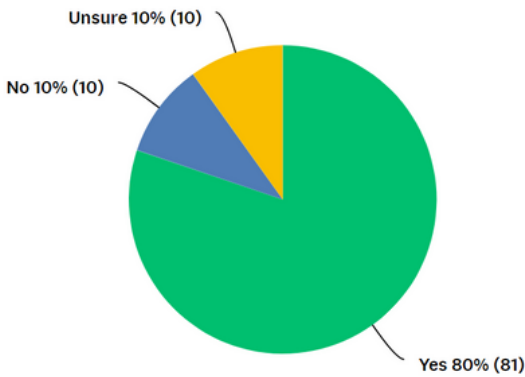
What policy levels does your organization work on? (Select all)

Answered: 101   Skipped: 21

- State Policy: 57%
- Regional Policy: 38%
- Local Policy: 67%
- Organizational Policy: 62%
- My organization does not work on policy: 12%

Question: As an employee, do you engage in policy in your position?

- No 40% (40)
- Yes 60% (61)
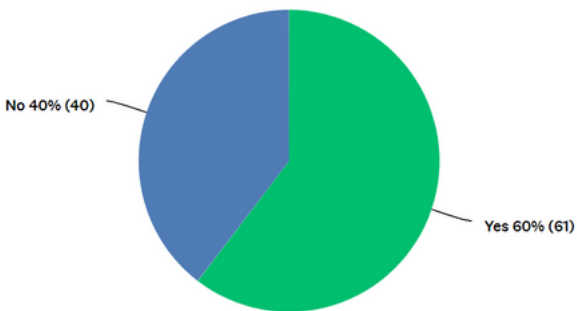
What areas does your organization do policy work in? (Select all)

- Air quality: 35.64%
- Chronic disease prevention and management: 54.46%
- Climate change: 15.84%
- Gun violence prevention: 22.77%
- Healthcare cost/access: 40.59%
- Healthy communities/environments: 69.31%
- Infectious diseases: 35.64%
- Mental health access/suicide prevention: 51.49%
- Public health workforce/funding: 42.57%
- Reproductive health access: 20.79%
- My organization does not work on policy: 8.91%
- Other (please specify): 16.83%

Question: As an individual, do you engage in policy work on your personal time?

- Yes 41% (41)
- No 59% (60)
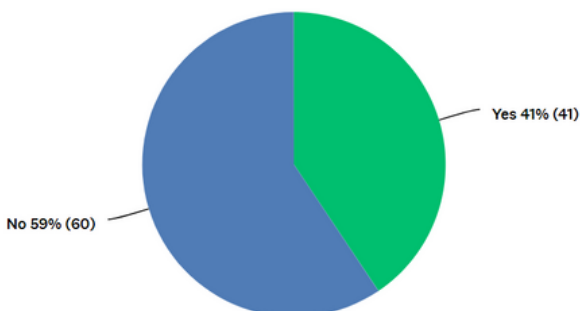
ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLICY

Question: Rate your attitude towards working on policy.

Answered: 87   Skipped: 35

Respondents felt policy work is very important, but are not confident in doing policy work.

How important do you think policy work is for public health?
- 61% — 5: Very High
- 34% — 4: High
- 5% — 1: Very low

How confident do you feel doing policy work?
- 6% — 5: Very High
- 29% — 4: High
- 41% — 3: Neutral
- 18% — 2: Low
- 6% — 1: Very low

How interested are you in engaging in policy work?
- 26% — 5: Very High
- 29% — 4: High
- 28% — 3: Neutral
- 11% — 2: Low

Legend:
- 5: Very High
- 4: High
- 3: Neutral
- 2: Low
- 1: Very low

Question: What has worked well to influence policy change?
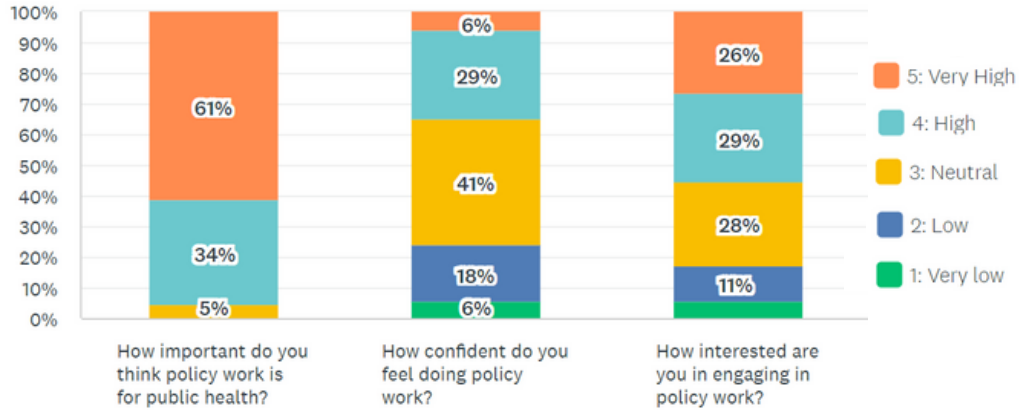
The most significant facilitators include:
- Sharing relevant data and stories
- Building partnerships
- Leadership support

- None of the above: 2.30%
- Building relationships with...: 70.11%
- Partnering with other organizations: 82.76%
- Having relevant data to share: 83.91%
- Having community stories to share: 66.67%
- Providing advocacy trainings for staff: 37.93%
- Receiving funding/grants focused...: 34.48%
- Engaging the media: 32.18%
- Citizen support: 34.48%
- Organizational/leadership support: 64.37%
- Having a policy plan: 45.98%
- Other (please specify): 10.34%

Question: What are the barriers to work on policy?

Answered: 87   Skipped: 35

The most significant barriers include:
- Political climate
- Lack of resources
- Not allowed to
- Grant restrictions
- Lack of personnel

Legend:
- Significant
- Moderate
- Small Barrier
- Not a Barrier
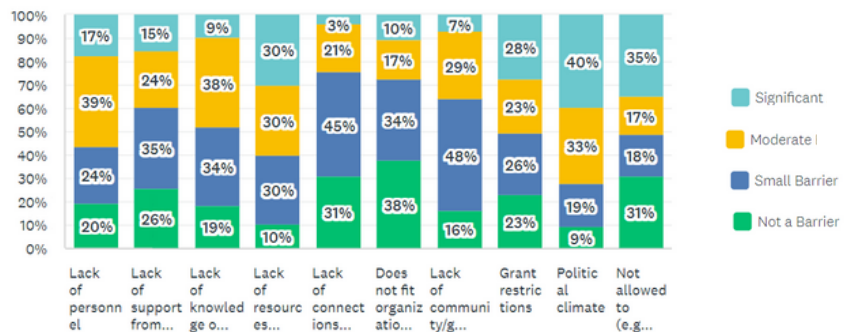
NEEDS FOR POLICY WORK

Question: What resources or changes do you need to engage in policy work more effectively?

Out of 87 total responses:

27 responses need more knowledge/training

- "I think an understanding of how to do this and that it is possibly not as overwhelming as one might think."
- "We need a more skilled workforce. Public health educators shy away from this work."

20 responses need more time/staff

- "As an employee - time is the biggest barrier. Unless part of a funded project, it goes to the back-burner regardless of how important."

11 responses need more support and partnerships

- From the community, media, and other organizations working on policy

9 responses need more resources and information

- "More guided direct actions we could take - calling local legislators to support specific bills, as well as specific dates to show up at events."
- Other responses include the need for data and organizational engagement
- "Having means of showing potential impact of policy change"

Other responses include the need for data and organizational engagement

- "Having means of showing potential impact of policy change"

ORGANIZING A POLICY GROUP

Question: If a policy group were created, what efforts would you find most helpful?
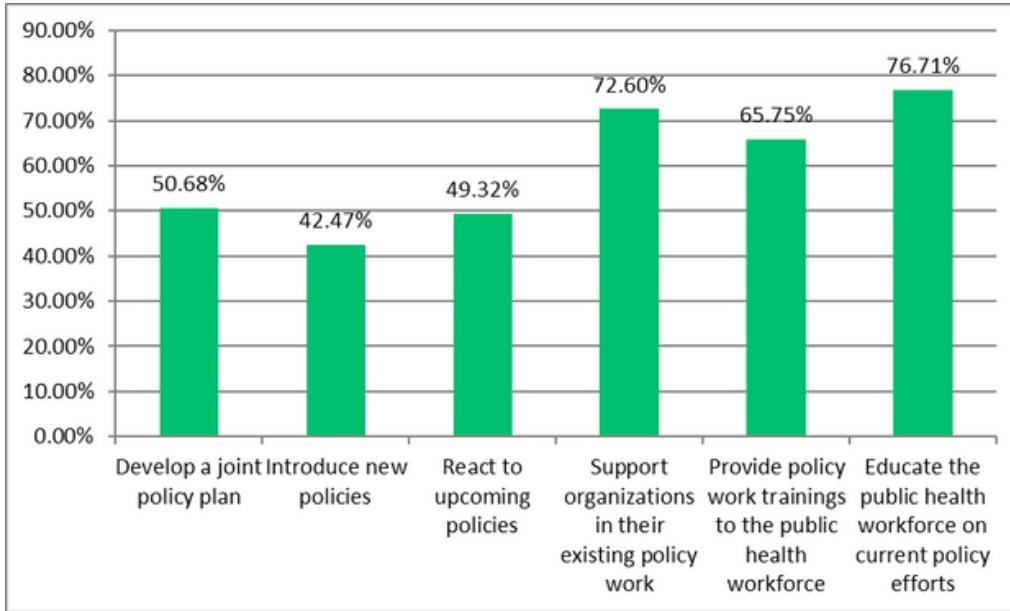
Question: If a policy group were created, what efforts would you find most helpful? (open-ended)

- Training
- Funding
- Staying informed
- Having connections/partners
- Highlighting successes/examples
- Coordination/aligned message
- A space to have your voice heard
- Leadership support

"Training for elected officials on prevention and how to look at data."

"Working with us to create a list of subject matter experts based on the topic that can be called up when needed to present to the committee, assist with media requests, or rule/legislative writing or testimony."

"Bringing together and coordinating all the different groups that are working on these efforts, so that there is not a duplication of efforts."

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW
DEMOGRAPHICS

In Spring 2023, Get Healthy Utah conducted nine key informant interviews with twelve individuals. Key informants were chosen for their professional experience with public health policy. To protect their privacy and retain anonymity, names will not be disclosed.

Organizations Interviewed

The twelve key informants interviewed were employed at the following organizations:

- American Heart Association
- Bear River Health Department
- United Way of Salt Lake
- Utah Association of Local Health Departments
- Utah Public Health Association
- Utah Department of Health and Human Services
- Voices for Utah Children

Themes:

Each interview was coded, and eleven themes were identified:

- Policy Priorities
- Collaboration
- Attitude towards Policy Work
- Future Efforts
- Levels of Policy
- Worked Well/Successes
- Worked Not Well/Barriers
- Policy Needs
- Public Health Policy Group

POLICY PRIORITIES

Key informants shared their greatest priorities for public health policy change.

Summary:

- High priority areas include health equity, the social determinants of health, and public health funding

- An organization's mission and goals determine which policies employees can invest time and resources in

- Effective policy work includes passing new policies, strengthening existing policies, and defending against detrimental policies

- Legislative priorities change yearly based on which policies have momentum

Quotes:

- "My role is designed to look more upstream, look at policy structure, environmental changes, and really try to move our programs within our office in that direction. And so yeah, my focus is social determinants of health, health equity, and those more upstream drivers of health."

- "There are times when I can be front and center, leading the effort on something, and that'll mostly be like, OK, if this percentage of my time is going towards this, it has to be within those goal guidance areas for the organization."

- "Sometimes the work is to strengthen a policy instead of pass a policy. Maybe there's a policy already there, but now you can add in."

- "We have a policy agenda and it's a huge list. And I think it's just one of those that you try and prioritize and put your efforts to where you feel like it's going to be best served. But in the long run, you might have that one policy that, all of a sudden, [becomes important] because the timing is right."

COLLABORATION

Key informants shared their thoughts about the role of collaboration in policy work.

Summary:

- Effective partnerships can often be found across nontraditional sectors

- Coalitions are an effective way to connect partners and organize policy work

- Those who will be disproportionately impacted by a policy should always be given a voice

- Barriers to effective collaboration include a lack of time, resources, and professional bandwidth

Quotes:

- "The reason we got those bills staved off was because of the business community and not because of public health. And that, I think, was a really big-eye opening experience to me—that there's a lot of correlations between a strong business environment and a strong public health response."

- "We have a coalition...that is where we get into the lobbying advocacy part of it. So they're able to do more actual connecting with legislators, connecting with our other partners."

- "You probably know this, but just [make] sure that you have the voices of the people who are going to be disproportionately impacted."

- "I like to be really collaborative, but I have to sort of weigh each thing, such as how much I can spend my time and [resources] up doing that."

- "It's really about getting the right champion to be able to propel it forward. And I think that's one of the things that can be beneficial with collaborating. It has to be a collective effort, no matter what."

ATTITUDE TOWARD POLICY WORK

Key informants shared insights about general attitudes toward policy work.

Summary:
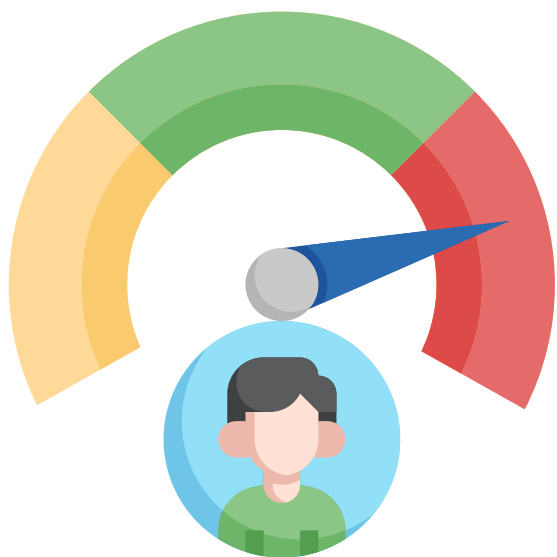
- Public health professionals feel that policy work is important and can have a large impact on the health of populations

- Many professionals shy away from policy work out of concern that they cannot lobby

- Barriers to engaging in policy work include legislative fatigue, burnout, insufficient training, and low support from leadership

- Legislative priorities change yearly based on which policies have momentum

Quotes:

- "I love talking about policy.... it's going to have greater impact than some of the things that are easier to do that just have a smaller impact. I think it's fantastic."

- "A lot of them are scared off from doing any work at the capital or just any policy work because they think, well, I I can't do this because I'm not allowed to lobby. But there's a lot that they can do that I don't think they necessarily think about sometimes."

- "It's this very long process that can take a really long time. People get burned out, people leave...a lot of people lose steam."

- "I'm trying to engage [my staff] in policy work, and it's not quite as immediately rewarding, if that makes sense. So I think sometimes [it's hard] even just selling our own staff of the importance."

- "How do we get our programs and our managers excited about [policy work]. So they're excited, but not deflated by the red tape that is around them and the experiences they've had in the past. I think that's really just [critical], having upper-level leadership really saying policy is important to improve health and well-being."

FUTURE EFFORTS

Key informants shared about their future efforts in policy work.

Summary:

- Many organizations are in process of increasing their partnerships and updating their policy agendas and strategic plans

- Public health professionals are striving to expand their data sources, improve their storytelling, and better engage community voices

- Upcoming innovative efforts include organizing a Health Equity Institute and organizing youth councils

Quotes:

- "One new thing that we're hoping to do is to develop an office-level policy agenda. And I think that the hope is that it'll be informed by our engagements...Where do we have support across different programs and partners?"

- "As movements happen through the legislative session or as new energy or funding comes into different spaces, we're hoping to update the policy guide. So hopefully do a review with partners annually to see what do we need to update."

- "We're really going to focus in on the storytelling, story collecting, and trying to find where the missing pieces [are]...related to how to empower and support community-based organizations to be part of these larger policy conversations that may not be as easily involved."

- "We are incubating the public health institute...We're trying to see where in Utah there are some of those [policy] gaps...and what can this Health Equity Institute really play a good role in."

- "We're starting a Youth Leadership Council...We're trying to get more high school students right now. I think it's a lot of college age folks that they've been able to recruit."

LEVELS OF POLICY

Key informants shared their thoughts about the various levels of policy they work at.

Summary:

- Passing a local-level policy can provide momentum for passing the policy statewide

- Key players and networks differ across local, state, and federal policy work

- Regardless of the level of policy work, it is valuable to obtain public support and community involvement

- Many organizations have a formal process regarding what policies they will and will not support, regardless of policy level

Quotes:

- "I've learned that you have more bang for your buck when you can get something at a local level, so that the state legislature can see how it works on a statewide level...You have to show how effective it is, because sometimes you just can't get it on a statewide scale initially."

- "Key players--what we learned...is it's always good to be in contact with their constituents. That's who all of these political leaders want to hear from: the people that vote them into office."

- "The process is the same whether we're looking at a piece of legislation, whether we're looking at a statewide policy or a departmental policy. We kind of do the same thing. We review the policy to determine if it's needed and what the cost benefit ratio is. Then we decide if we're going to move forward with the support of the policy."

- "I think doing that public outreach and getting members of the public to support something can be really valuable to all."

SUCCESSES AND FACILITATORS

Key informants identified their policy successes and what facilited them.

Summary:

- Helpful policy tools include bill trackers, model policies, one-pagers, talking points, and data aggregated by legislative district

- Legislators are universally motivated by protecting and supporting youth

- Strong relationships with legislators and decision-makers greatly enhance policy work

- Public health workers are valued as content experts and resources for data

Quotes:

- "I think it helps to contextualize [a policy] in a one to two pager...basically like a policy memo so he could see it outlined. I think that's something that's really helpful."

- "Model policies are super helpful, if we can provide some model policies, as well as...the bill tracker, too."

- "Be able to visualize and say here's the situation that's happening not only in the state, but [the county they] represent. Here's what's happening in Tooele County. And you can see this is a problem for your area. That has been extremely powerful in helping to get policy change taken care of."

- "Our legislature is really, and has always been, a champion of [tobacco policy] because they want to prevent youth from being harmed...and so they're very willing to put protections in place to help youth."

- "We do meet with legislators pretty frequently, like during the interim session, we try to stay in contact with them."

- "We will very frequently get requests from senators or representatives asking for draft language, and that gives the department and I the opportunity to provide that. We can't proactively send it out, but if they ask us for it, we can."

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Key informants identified challenges and barriers to successful policy work.

Summary:

- Red tape restricts public health officials from engaging fully in policy work

- Utah's legislature is not expert in public health and the political climate is often unfavorable towards public health

- Public health is underfunded while political opponents are often well-funded

- Policy is slow to change and can be opposed even after being successfully passed

Quotes:

- "If the governor doesn't support something, we can't speak about it so publicly. So there's red tape."

- "We have a layperson legislature and certainly not very many public health-minded experts up in that room."

- "We're faced with a lot of identity politics right now, and that makes public health really hard."

- "I think it's important to remember...how much money the commercial tobacco industry has and how much money they put in towards lobbying and all of that efforts to undo work that we've done. So I think that's a challenge or a barrier: making sure that people understand that it's a constant battle about making sure that we're not losing progress that we've already made, as well as attacks on data sources."

- "So they're like, well, where can we come and get funding? Well, I don't want them to come to my pot of money. I have two pennies. And we fought for 30 years for four pennies. We don't have money."

- "Sadly, policy changes very slow. We've had the same policy agenda for some time just because things are slow to change."

POLICY NEEDS

Key informants shared their greatest policy-related needs.

Summary:

- Professionals need training about how they can effectively engage in policy work. They benefit from specific action steps

- Public health needs to get better at storytelling and translating data for the needs and interests of decision-makers

- Public health infrastructure and funding needs to be improved to support effective policy work

Quotes:

- "Help [staff] just understand the difference between, what is advocating? What is educating, what is lobbying? That conversation that we always have to have in the realm of public health."

- "I started going to the hill with them and kind of learning the process...it was only because there were so many great people that helped me, that mentored me along this way."

- "We've got to get better, moving forward, at telling our story."

- "We need to remember that [legislators] don't have a ton of time. And sometimes we try to convince them of how important a cause is with pages and pages of data and information...the more succinct we can be, and if we can share more of that personal—give it that face—we can go further with that."

- "I mean obviously we've hit on the big [issue] with it being, what can we and can't we say. I think also understanding the concept of funding and that [we're] going to need some sort of funding source to allow this policy to happen."

- "If [legislators] don't want [public health] to... be 'pulled into the federal government with our federal funding,' then our state needs to look at our infrastructure."

PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY GROUP

Key informants shared their thoughts about convening a public health policy group.
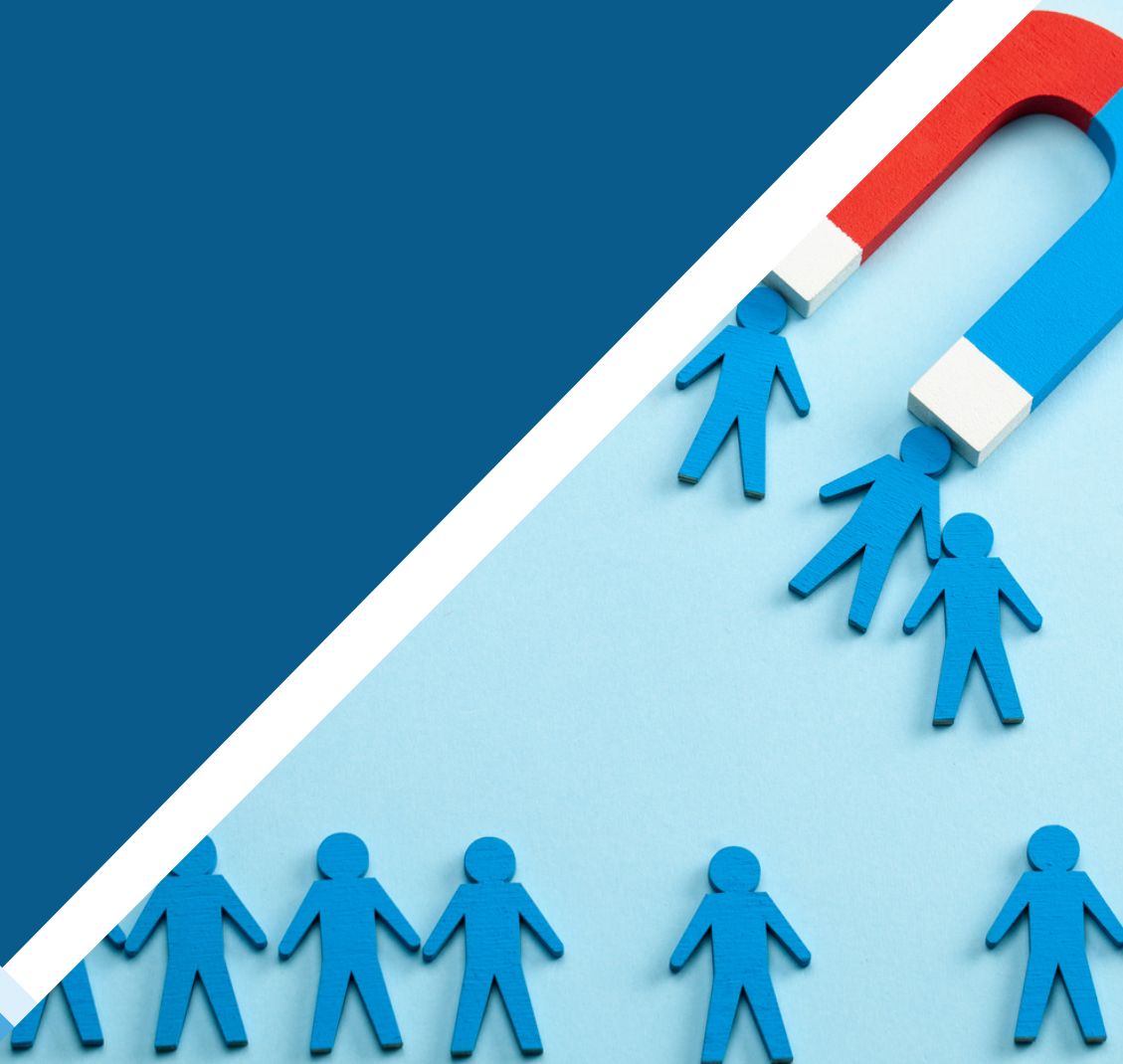
Summary:

- Most organizations are supportive of organizing a public health policy group but do not have the bandwidth to take on a leading role

- Potential challenges include competing agendas among group members and a duplication or redundancy of efforts

- The group needs a clear direction and concrete goals and action steps to be effective and worth members' time

Quotes:

- "I do think that it's a great idea to put something like this together. The successes that we've seen from groups and coalitions that we've had that would operate very similar to this--I think it's really powerful."

- "Having that coordinated approach would be beneficial and helpful because policy doesn't happen in a vacuum. It has to happen with everybody working together, and the more people that work on it, the more likely that you are to get it to pass. But on the flip side, if you have too many things then you don't get anything done because you've got competing, "Well, this is my policy, this is yours," and then it just doesn't become helpful."

- "Making sure it's not a redundant effort because a lot of times everybody in the nonprofit space, they've got too much on their plate [and] not enough time."

- "[Make] it purposeful. We all are so busy that you do need to have action that comes out of meetings. And so knowing what that kind of action is, I think, is good and important...I know that I'm feeling more pumped about meetings and showing up again if I left feeling like there was movement."

- "I find that people want to do things, they just don't know what to do. And so if you can give them an exact task, like you want to help, great come up here. Here is the thing you need to say. Here is the person you need to say it to. When you're done, fill out this form. They're happy to do it, right?"

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TAKE-AWAYS

Summary:

Overall, public health professional in Utah feel that policy work is very important. However, they feel heavily constrained by red tape, a lack of confidence, and limited time and resources.

Needs and Recommendations:

1) Increase policy knowledge and training opportunities

Public health professionals need to be educated on the difference between advocacy and lobbying, and be better trained on the type of policy work they can do within their position. They rely too heavily on data as a persuasion tool and need to increase their skills at impactful storytelling.

2) Increase funding, time, and leadership support for policy work

Most of the policy work accomplished by public health professionals is done within their professional position, during work hours. The amount of time and resources they can dedicate to policy work, as well as what policies they can and cannot support, is determined by their organization and superiors. Organizations and leadership should lead out in prioritizing policy change and strongly consider if they can increase the funding, time, and support they provide for their employees to engage in policy work.

3) Provide tools relevant for influencing policy change

Public health professionals most effectively engage in policy work when they are given the correct resources and specific action items. Highly relevant tools include bill trackers, model policies, one-pagers, talking points, and data aggregated by legislative district.

4) Improve opportunities for networking and partnerships

Public health professionals have a strong desire to partner with other organizations and community members in addressing policy, but seldom have the bandwidth to convene partners on their own. Coalitions are perceived positively, but must have a clear direction, result in specific action items, and engage a diverse group of individuals unified around a similar goal to be effective. The most effective policy coalitions engage legislators and other policy decision-makers in their meetings and efforts.