CHOOSE EFFECTIVE POLICIES & PROGRAMS

Guidance and tools

Choosing effective policies and programs that work in real life will maximize your chances of success. Not every well-intentioned policy or program is effective. Taking the time to look for strategies that have been shown to effectively address particular problems or issues will be time well spent.

Purpose:

Explore and select evidence-informed policies and programs to address priority issues.

Who to Involve:

Multi-sector team of partners (which should include leaders and stakeholders from business, healthcare, education, government, public health, funders, and the community sectors)

Choose Effective Policies & Programs: Start Guide

We understand our solutions will be better if they have been shown to work or are based on research. We plan to look for these types of policies and programs.

Choose Effective Policies & Programs: Act Guide

We’ve begun to look at policies and programs that might work well in our community. We’d like to make sure we’re selecting the most effective strategies and examples.
CHOOSE EFFECTIVE POLICIES & PROGRAMS: START GUIDE

Explore effective policies and programs

Your team has likely already explored some options for policies and programs to address your priority issues. Now it’s time to dig a little deeper to find and choose effective strategies that best suit your community. You’ve identified the key issues on which you want to focus your efforts to improve health in your community, but how do you proceed?

Here are three possible approaches described by the Community Tool Box:

- We could just do what most other communities are doing, without worrying about how well it works. (This may sound silly, but a surprising number of organizations in a variety of fields adopt this approach.)
- We could invent something from scratch. After all, there was a lot of community involvement in the assessment and planning process. Surely, if we put all those brains together, we can come up with some good ideas.
- We could look for some practices and interventions that are already being used elsewhere that seem to be successful in ways that might work for us.(1)

We all probably agree the first option doesn’t make much sense, so what next? Choosing whether to invent your own approach or adopt one that has been shown to work will depend largely on the time and resources your community has to spend, and on the availability of evidence-informed policies and programs that could address your community’s priorities. As you begin to invent or adopt your approach, you will want to be sure to consider evidence of effectiveness.

“Evidence of effectiveness” can mean different things to different people. As you research potential policies and programs to address your community’s health priorities, you will likely find a continuum of evidence, including systematic reviews, peer-reviewed studies, unpublished reports (grey literature), and expert recommendations. You may also find strategies labeled promising practices, best practices, or model programs from a variety of organizations. Each organization has its own criteria and labels based on its definition of evidence. As you discuss how your team will structure its research, decide what evidence means to you and what types of evidence your community will accept.

Here is one example of how evidence can be classified along a continuum:

- **Scientifically Supported:** Numerous studies or systematic review(s) with strong positive results; no substantial contradictory evidence.
- **Some Evidence:** Research suggests positive impacts overall; further study may be warranted.
• **Expert Opinion:** Recommended by credible groups; research evidence limited. Credible groups are recognized for their impartial expertise in an area of interest.

• **Insufficient Evidence:** Evidence limited, mixed, or unavailable; further study warranted.

• **Evidence of Ineffectiveness:** Research consistently shows program is detrimental or has no effect.

In June, the *Roadmaps to Health* Action Center will be expanded to include a searchable database of policies and programs that can improve health. This database will systematically assess, summarize, and rate the evidence for policies and programs, with attention to the following questions:

• How strong is the demonstrated effect?
• Have results been replicated?
• Is it clear that the policy or program caused the reported changes?

This approach to assessing evidence incorporates what we know from rigorous scientific study as well as evidence grounded in practice (case study) and the observations of unbiased experts.

Your team will find many resources with ideas for policies and programs. Here are some key sources used by the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps* team (PDF). The Community Tool Box also provides Links to Databases of Best Practices, with two types of databases: comprehensive and categorical.

You can find specific examples of actions that have been found to be effective here. These are policies and programs that you might consider as possible strategies for improving health in your community.

In addition to searching databases, it is helpful to think about how policies and programs have been implemented in communities. *Criteria for Choosing Promising Practices and Community Interventions* (from the Community Tool Box) includes a number of possible places to get ideas for policies and programs. As you hone in on the most likely candidate for implementation, you will want to evaluate what is known about its effectiveness.

• **Networking.** Talk to everyone you know. Directors and staff from other agencies, coalition members, and others may know about things happening in the area, or even state- or nationwide.

• **State and national advocacy and professional organizations.** These organizations often give awards for best practices, or document them in journal articles and at conferences.

• **International, state and federal agencies.** UNESCO, the U.S. Council of Mayors, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and others often list "best practices" in programs they fund. These can be found on the Internet or in government publications.

• **Foundations and other private funders.** Many funders list best practices or describe projects they fund. Lists and descriptions can be found online, in libraries, or by contacting funders directly.

• **Academia.** Local colleges and universities often have researchers looking at just what you’re concerned with, or know others who are. Furthermore, there may be graduate students who’d like to work with you on a project. Start by contacting the university department most closely connected to the work you do - education, environmental science, psychology, public health, etc. (1)

**Suggested tools:**

• *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps Searching the Evidence* (PDF)
• **Self-Assessment to Help you Find and Choose Promising Practices** (from the Community Tool Box) includes questions to help guide your search for and selection of policies and programs.

• **Criteria for Choosing Promising Practices and Community Interventions** (from the Community Tool Box) defines promising practices and interventions and suggests strategies for finding them.

• **County Health Rankings & Roadmaps example evidence-informed policies and programs**

• **Links to Databases of Best Practices** (from the Community Tool Box) includes two types of databases: comprehensive and categorical.

**Consider available resources, political/legal constraints, and general community readiness so the policies and/or programs that best fit your community are selected**

In addition to evidence of effectiveness, it’s also important to consider your community context as you research policies and programs. Consider the following questions:

• Are there any political or legal constraints that might make a strategy more or less successful?

• What is your community’s readiness for the policies or programs you’re considering?
  
  – Community readiness can range from none at all (i.e., the community has never heard of the issue in question) to already having successful programs in place. Understanding community readiness will help you tailor your strategy to what the community is willing to accept and get involved in. (2) The Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at Colorado State University has developed a [Community Readiness Model](#) that assesses how ready a community is to address an issue.

• Does your community have resources to successfully implement and evaluate a policy or program? It may be helpful to go back to the information you collected about community assets and resources during your assessment.
  
  – Can you leverage existing resources and assets to ensure effective implementation? For example, if there are others already working on a selected policy or program, work together to decide if it would be best to build on their efforts or create a new approach that complements their work.
  
  – Will you have to pursue funding to implement your policy or program? Act on What’s Important includes guidance on [finding funding](#).
  
  – The [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps Guide to Funding Your Community Health Initiative](#) includes a short readiness assessment tool that outlines the critical elements that should be in place before you write a funding proposal.

**Suggested tools:**

• **County Health Rankings & Roadmaps Guide to Funding Your Community Health Initiative** provides suggestions for identifying funding sources to tackle issues raised in your community’s rankings.

• **Community Readiness Model** (from The Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at Colorado State University) assesses how ready a community is to address an issue. The basic premise is that matching an intervention to a community’s level of readiness is absolutely essential for success.

• **Community Readiness** (from the Community Tool Box) provides an overview of the Community Readiness Model and maps other Community Tool Box chapters and sections to the stages of readiness.
CHOOSE EFFECTIVE POLICIES & PROGRAMS: ACT GUIDE

Review Choose Effective Policies & Programs: Start Guide

Has your team:

- Explored effective policies and programs?
- Considered political/legal constraints, general community readiness, and available resources so that the policies and/or programs that best fit your community are selected?

If not, you may want to review the Choose Effective Policies & Programs: Start Guide.

Consider whether potential policies and programs need to be adapted to best fit your community

It’s important to recognize that policies and programs may not be suitable for your community straight “out of the box.” Policies and programs don’t always travel well, and you may need to adjust the strategy to fit your community. If it’s true that no two communities are exactly alike, it should be equally true that interventions that work for them won’t be exactly alike, either, though they may have many common elements.(1)

A word of caution, adapting policies and programs means your evaluation needs to be more rigorous to ensure that the strategy is working as intended and to allow you to make adjustments if necessary.

Suggested tools:

- Criteria for Choosing Promising Practices and Community Interventions (from the Community Toolbox) includes a definition of promising practices and interventions and suggests strategies for finding them.

Review and select policies and programs that effectively address priority issues

Now that you’ve done your research and identified potential effective policies and programs to address priority issues, it’s time to choose which strategies to implement. As you make your selection, you may want to consider a balance of strategies. Choose manageable short-term strategies for early success, while also laying the groundwork to implement more complex, long-term strategies.(3)

As your team considers several possible policies and programs, it might be helpful to use some of the voting or decision making procedures you used to select your priority issues. Like in Focus on What’s Important, this process can be informal using criteria as a general rule of thumb and voting on the top strategies or follow a more structured process of rating each potential policy or program.

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps—A Healthier Nation, County by County
The Community Tool Box suggests considering the following questions to help you choose the best policy or program for your community.

1. Does the policy or program meet all of the criteria set by your search?
2. Some programs can be complicated, which means an organization that can support the effort is needed. Are there organizations in your community that can support the effort? If not, can you create such an organization?
3. What is the evidence that the policy or program will have some impact?
4. Will you be able to replicate the practice? If not, how will you modify it for your community?
5. What resources do you have or will you be able to generate to support the policy or program? Will a pared back version satisfy your needs?
6. Is the policy or program compatible with your community's beliefs, attitudes and values (e.g., will your community support condom distribution)?
7. How will this policy or program work for you? What would make it a success for your community?(4)

Suggested tools:

- Self-Assessment to Help you Find and Choose Promising Practices (from the Community Tool Box) includes questions to help guide your search for and selection of policies and programs.