

## TIPS FOR LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND OP-EDS

Writing a letter to the editor offers you an opportunity to call attention to the progress or work underway in your community that address the challenges identified in the *County Health Rankings*. Share briefly why addressing the barriers to health are important and include relevant facts and statistics identified in the *Rankings* to localize the impact and increase interest in the publication of your letter. Here are some additional tips to getting your letter to the editor published.

### *Identify your target publications and programs.*

Select five to 10 venues to focus your opinion letter placement efforts on. Don't forget trade publications, and community and weekly newspapers. Depending on your audience, those venues can have greater influence than an opinion letter in the NYT. And it's easier to get letters to the editor published in these smaller publications. Once you have your target list, you're ready to respond when an opportunity surfaces.

### *Research the letters policy for each venue on your target list.*

Most publications and programs publicize what they want in a letter to the editor, and how and to whom to send it. Examples include:

- Asheville (NC) Citizen Times -- conditions for rejection [http://orig.citizen-times.com/service/faq/letters\\_policy.shtml](http://orig.citizen-times.com/service/faq/letters_policy.shtml)
- Orlando Sentinel (FL) – no more than 250 words <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/orl-ed-how-contribute-021909-htmlstory.html>
- The Washington Post -- letters must be exclusive to the Post <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/edit/letters/letterform.htm>

### *Reference a recent print or broadcast article.*

Write your organization's letter as a direct response to recent coverage, building on the focus presented or emphasizing how your organization's perspective wasn't presented (and presenting it clearly).

### *Respond as quickly as you can.*

If there's an issue or news story that's getting a lot of attention in the press, draft a letter or at least key message points so your organization is prepared to finalize and submit your letter pronto.

*Hone your opinion letter writing style, before you're on deadline to submit it.*

Read letters in your target venues on a regular basis to learn how to write the most effective letter.

*Be Concise.*

The publication will shorten your letter to fit its format. The more it has to edit, the less control you have of what gets printed. Include two to three paragraphs, each with no more than three sentences.

*State Your Point Early and Clearly.*

Lead with the most important information that you want to convey. That way readers can leave the story at any point and understand it, even if they do not have all the details.

*Include Your Contact Information.*

Your contact information is a prerequisite for most publications to print your letter. Include your full name, title, organization name, address, phone number and email at the top of the page and sign the letter at the bottom.

*Follow up!*

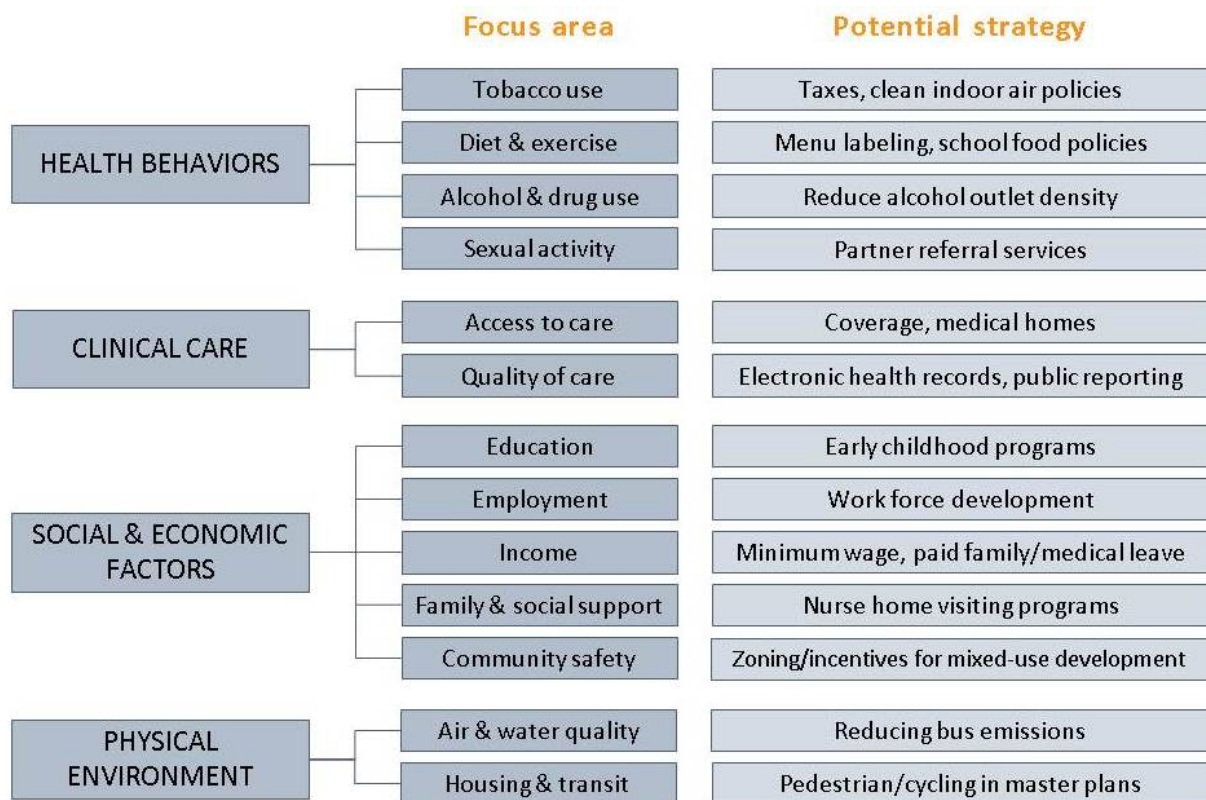
Make a follow-up phone call to the editor in question to make sure your letter has been received. It's best to keep calling until you get through, rather than leaving a voicemail message.

*(Source: Getting Attention newsletter, published by Nancy Schwartz & Company)*

## Writing a Solution-Oriented Op-ed

Writing an op-ed about the *Rankings* is a great way to motivate action around health improvement efforts in your community. An op-ed is an ideal tool to offer potential solutions to the challenges identified in the *County Health Rankings* or highlight progress made. For example, shedding light on how a specific program or policy addresses one or more *Rankings* health factors (health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic, and physical environment) is a great focus for a local op-ed.

The chart below lists examples of potential strategies you may want to consider for each health factor measured in the *Rankings*. Other examples can be found in *What Works for Health* ([www.countyhealthranking.org/what-works-for-health](http://www.countyhealthranking.org/what-works-for-health))



## *Op-ed Example*

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### *Detroit News*

TITLE: Wayne County Needs a Cultural Revolution on Health

BYLINE: KATE KOHN-PARROTT AND CHRIS ALLEN

Wayne County's health rankings, published by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, unfortunately aren't news. What is more provocative, perhaps, is that we have some of Michigan's finest health systems based in Wayne County, yet the health of its population remains poor.

This is not a problem of the quality of health care. It is a problem of the quality of health. The population of Wayne County needs access to highly specialized (and expensive) health care resources, but they should need them a lot less. What the population needs is health.

As we retool our region to regain our role as a pre-eminent manufacturing and engineering sector, we need to focus on our most valuable resource — and, potentially our most valuable product — the health of our people. The recent public concern over Michigan's budget should have considered whether we should reinvest that money in population health.

Years of budget cuts have decimated our public health infrastructure. Community health initiatives struggle to deliver much needed health promotion and disease prevention programs in vulnerable communities. We need good roads to transport raw materials and consumer goods to support the economy, but we need healthy people to do the work and generate the new ideas that will advance our position in the world.

The county health rankings are a tool to generate conversation and urgency for communities to recognize the health problems they face and create local solutions to address them. We must radically change the health of this region.

The Affordable Care Act is increasing access to valuable hospital diagnostic and treatment services. While it mandates that health plans provide first-dollar (free) coverage to preventive care that is delivered by in-network providers, statistics show that historically only about 30 percent of individuals with access to free preventive care have taken advantage of that benefit. We need to find a way to get people to use their benefits and become engaged in their health.

One of the ongoing problems in our health care delivery system has been the inappropriate use of emergency services by people in all income strata, especially by people with chronic conditions that could be treated in a primary care setting. It has been estimated that as much as 70 percent of expensive emergency visits can be treated in less costly settings. The money saved could be reinvested in creating community health services.

As we look at the key indicators in the county health rankings — from infant mortality to obesity and violence — it's clear that we need to repurpose our resources around population health management. Together with regional public health officials, community health advocates, and other stakeholders, the Health Authority's Population Health Council has convened many of the people who can help us arrive at a sustainable solution. On March 10, the Greater Detroit Area Council and Health Authority co-sponsored a Population Health Forum, which released its first State of Population Health Report. The report supports the use of the county health rankings and recommends ways to improve those rankings.

The Wayne County health rankings should alarm everyone.

We need a cultural revolution in Southeast Michigan. We need to create a culture of health and elevate it to the top of the public policy agenda. We need to invest in our population health infrastructure. And we need to become serious about creating health. As long as we remain a sick county, we won't have a healthy economy.

Kate Kohn-Parrott is president and CEO of the Greater Detroit Area Health Council.

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