Narrative and messages to build support for local public health investment

The messages in this guide are intended to inspire—not prescribe—how public health communicators can apply pro-democracy narrative values and pillars when making the case for participation and investment in local governmental public health. Use them as starting points to develop messages that fit your own voice, community, and communications goals for increasing local public health funding, protecting public health authority, bolstering the local workforce, etc. Thank you to the Big Cities Health Coalition (BCHC) for collaborating on this tipsheet.

You'll find the full list of values and pillars at the end of this tipsheet. For more information, please see the Pro-Democracy and Public Health Narrative Playbook.

Core narrative

Together, community members and local public health departments build safe communities, which are vital to a free and fair society.

In communities across the country, people want health, safety, and opportunity for themselves and their neighbors.[1] What that looks like in each place may be different. That's the beauty of local public health teams that work with communities to understand needs and create solutions. Together, they create space for both informed individual choices and the conditions we all rely on to stay healthy: clean air and water, safe food, and protection from injury and violence. Strong local public health systems are responsive to changing needs and accountable to the people. Community members share responsibility by voting, joining community discussions, and helping to uphold the values of a free and fair society. This is democracy in action.

[1] The public health priorities you lead with will depend on the audiences you're addressing. In larger cities, public safety and affordable housing may rise to the top, as BCHC found in recent surveys. In smaller towns and rural areas, you might talk about being prepared for emergencies, knowing that housing is safe, and trusting restaurant food and drinking water. Even better, you can say, "In this community, people care about ___." One of the key benefits of local government public health is its deep listening and responsiveness to community issues. Be sure your narrative and message work demonstrates that this is true. For additional resources on communicating in a local government context, read the Pro-Democracy and Local Government Narrative Playbook.

COORDINATING PARTNER Metropolitan Group the power of voice
CORE PARTNER PACE Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement
PARTNER APHA American Public Health Association For science. For action. For health.
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Core messages that make up the narrative

Benefit	Everyone in a community is represented by the local public health departments. Together, community members and local leaders make it easier for all people to be as healthy as possible. By seeing community strengths and needs up close, local efforts can test out new ideas—created with community input—to fix problems and find solutions. Creating the conditions for health is an investment and a community benefit just like roads, libraries, and other public resources made possible through our tax dollars. We can live longer, healthier lives when we can drink tap water with confidence, trust that our workplaces and schools are safe, eat in restaurants, and feel secure in public gatherings. These are some of the many ways local health departments protect the community so we experience more freedom in our everyday lives.
Challenge	When people don't know how to say what they need for their health, or when leaders don't listen and stay accountable to those needs, protections are weakened. We get harmful policies, lack of investment, and fewer opportunities for community members to create solutions. Public health breaks down, preventable diseases spread, people are exposed to more toxic substances and other risks, and communities become less safe.
Solution	In a functioning democracy, people work together to identify problems and create solutions. People built the public health system we have today, which means people, together, can build a better system. Community members should participate in opportunities to help local leaders make investments in public health where they are needed most. Examples include access to fresh, healthy food; water and buildings free of lead and other contaminants; elimination of tobacco marketing to kids; and many others. Showing up helps decision-makers see public health needs, and holds them accountable to address and fund them.
Call to action	Advancing the public's health depends on all of us. When people participate, and have a real say, we build stronger, safer communities for all of us. • People have many options for supporting and building their local public health system: Vote for officials who prioritize health; participate in community needs assessments, which decision-makers use to create policies and budgets; offer comments at a city council or county commission meeting. • Local leaders must be accountable to community needs. When communities and leaders work together, trust builds and civic participation grows. People can count on local public health knowledge and experience, and add their voice to decisions that affect safety, housing, food, air, and water.

Additional message details

These can be customized, mixed and matched, and added to by organizations that want to dial up aspects of the messaging, bring in their own examples and calls to action, etc.

Benefit

- Public health designs and promotes policies, systems, and services for safety and health, and empowers residents to make healthy choices for themselves, their families, and the entire community.
    - *Show with stories and descriptions the safety and health issues people in your community care about most.*
- Local health departments share an interest in a free and fair society, where freedom to make individual health decisions is balanced with the community's freedom from preventable illness, injury, and harm.
    - Local health departments enforce rules to keep housing safe and work to prevent homelessness. They make sure food at grocery stores and restaurants is safe and nutritious and provide food for people who are struggling to make ends meet. They stand ready to respond to emergencies.
- Because local health departments have a physical presence in our communities, people can build relationships and trust, visit and speak up, shape choices, and work together on decisions that affect everyone's health and safety.
    - When local public health departments are accountable to the people, and people participate in decision-making, solutions balance science and community wisdom, consider unique local needs, and honor shared responsibility to each other.
- Local governmental public health provides good, meaningful jobs for community members and gives people the chance to do important work that makes the community better.

Challenge

- Funding cuts in Washington, D.C., may seem far away, but most federal public health funds are used to keep states and local areas safe and healthy. Budget cuts threaten cities' and towns' ability to be ready for emergencies, create safe places to raise a family, stop diseases before they spread, and keep our local workforce strong.
- People need to know their voices matter to local leaders. They need to know which information to trust to stay safe. They need to feel safe or welcome joining in community decisions.
- The safety and health problems communities face today are changing faster than local public health systems were built to handle. Communities can build stronger systems through participation, shared responsibility, and investment in local public health.

Solution

- Everyone wants to live in a safe, healthy, thriving place. We don't want to have to choose between clean air, good education, affordable housing, and access to quality food—and we shouldn't have to choose. We need all these things in order to have the best possible quality of life for our families and our neighbors, and everyone needs and deserves them.
- Most people want more local resources to support effective services and programs.
    - Six in 10 people think their local government does not invest enough in services and programs that save lives and improve health. Additional investments are needed at the federal level to ensure adequate funding in communities across the country. (Source: Big Cities Health Coalition)
- Community members work with their public health departments to create conditions for all people to thrive.
    - *(Add your example here to show how community members worked with your department to create policies that make it easier for all people to live their healthiest lives.)*
    - Rural communities funded by Indiana's Growing Rural Opportunities for Well-Being (GROW) put the resources to work in the ways they know are most needed.
    - Small businesses, colleges, and community groups in Pima County and Maricopa County, Arizona, work with their local health departments to save lives during extreme heat.

Call to action

- Ask your local leaders to fund your local health department and demand that health choices are based on facts and community input, not politics.
- Take actions that protect both yourself and your community. Participate in discussions by hearing information and perspectives and by speaking up for what's important to you. Work through differences with respect. This is how we find solutions that protect our safety and health and build a free and fair society for all.
    - A great thing about local government public health is that there's a way for everyone to give input. For example, community members can participate in their health department's community health needs assessment, which decision-makers use to create policies and budgets. Community members can then hold their officials accountable for meeting those needs. Other health departments host town halls and quality improvement committees. Many city council or county commission meetings are open to the public, and community members can make comments about health needs.
        - *Local public health teams: Add information about how people can participate in community and state health needs assessments and other inputs. If possible, talk about your ongoing efforts to go into communities to listen and to make input options even more accessible.*
- The freedom we have is freedom we build together. The public's health is strongest when community members and public health departments are working together, finding solutions that create both freedom to make choices and freedom from preventable illness, injury, and harm.

Background: Advancing a pro-democracy and public health narrative

This messaging example follows the pro-democracy and public health narrative, incorporating the core values and narrative pillars below. See the Pro-Democracy and Public Health Narrative Playbook for more detail.

Core pro-democracy and public health values this message uses

PROSPERITY thriving	**FAIRNESS** equity and justice, dignity	**RESPONSIBILITY**
FAMILY / BELONGING interdependence, compassion, respect	FEARLESSNESS / STRENGTH courageousness	**SAFETY / SECURITY**
HONESTY authenticity	FREEDOM	REPRESENTATION

Pro-democracy and public health narrative pillars this message uses

1. Center evidence-based values that resonate across a broad audience—especially freedom, which is the top value seen as core to democracy across all major demographic groups.
2. Say what we're for: Prioritizing the public's health as a core element of an inclusive and participatory democracy—being clear that a democracy is about more than elections.
3. Amplify benefits that the public health sector best advances in a democracy.
4. Connect public health and democracy to people's everyday lives; use relatable language and keep the public's health centered (at equal or higher focus than systems, dollars, workforce).
5. Remind people that both democracy and public health are a shared responsibility—and we can improve them together.
    - Name the forces intentionally harming the public's health and why this is happening.
    - Show a role for sectors and individuals in strengthening the public's health and democracy.
    - Convey we can improve the public's health and democracy together.
6. Acknowledge that democracy and the public health system aren't perfect. Lead with humility and authenticity, and convey that we can improve both together.