Crafting a Message for Data-Driven Change

What is your purpose?
A strategic step toward communicating about children’s health and well-being is being explicit about your purpose. In addition to clarifying your purpose, understand your social, economic, and political environment as you develop a strategy to use data for change. Consider:

What is a clear statement of your issue?
Concisely state the issue.

Why does your issue matter? Answer the “so what” question for why the issue requires action. Elaborate on the problem central to your issue. Think about equity and how the issue affects your community. Use data to support your claims. Consider adding a descriptive narrative or anecdotes.

What is your proposed solution? Describe and substantiate the approach that will most effectively address the issue.

Who are the stakeholders? Stakeholders are your allies and opponents on the issue. Some examples include: policy makers, community activists, local program leaders, service providers, business owners, law enforcement staff, and health department staff. Consider why they are stakeholders, and what do they have to gain from supporting or opposing your issue.

What are the barriers and facilitators? What are challenges to enacting change on your issue? What is the current political climate, and what are current priorities? Is your issue a major concern when compared to other current events, and what do you need to do to elevate concern?

Who is your audience?
The data you need depend on your goal and whom you have to convince. In general, the level of complexity you use when presenting data depends on the people you are addressing.

Big Picture: Politicians, the general public and the media are audiences who tend to need information that is descriptive and quickly understandable, often from an overall perspective or big picture point of view. An example is communicating about the extent of emotional health issues among youth by showing the percentage of youth who feel depressed by demographic groups.

Details: Committee staff, special interest groups, and legislative analysts tend to want more detail than the big picture offers. This information will have more layers to it; often the audience understands the general idea but does not understand the details. An example is communicating about access to mental health care services by identifying the percentage of youth who receive mental health care among those who need treatment.

Specifics: Government agencies and academic institutions often need data to be more focused or detailed. Funding or planning decisions may be based on these numbers. An example is communicating about the impact of mental health instability on hospitals by examining categories of hospitalization discharge rates by type and age group.
How will the data support your message?

Data and stories are most effective when they appeal to values. If you can supply data that accurately describe children’s experiences and that appeals to values, then you have powerful tools to achieve your purpose.

Some common values that data can address are access, equity, rights, quality, and cost:

- **Access**—who has access to services, programs, insurance, etc.? Who doesn’t?
- **Equity**—is there an equitable distribution of resources across groups or regions?
- **Rights**—what are the rights of community members? What laws, regulations, or constitutional protections confer rights? On whom are the rights conferred?
- **Quality**—how is quality of life, environment, services, and programs impacted?
- **Cost**—what is the cost to taxpayers, community, business, individuals, and others?

If data are not available for your message, what can you do?

“Proxy” measures are data that can substitute for the data you need because they are closely related to your issue. For example, you may want to improve college readiness among youth in your county. You could use the percentage of students taking college preparatory classes as a proxy of college readiness and make a statement such as, “College readiness among students in our county may be lower than for California students overall, as suggested by a lower rate of college prep course completion in our school districts.”

A major advantage of using proxy measures is its low cost. The data can be relatively easy and inexpensive to find or collect. However, there may be concerns with generalizability. You will need to judge whether the data are a suitable proxy and be transparent about your approach.

Can you combine quantitative and qualitative data?

**Quantitative data** are usually measured and expressed in the form of numbers, rates or percentages. These data answer questions of who, what, when and where.

**Qualitative data** are usually measured and expressed in the form of words, concepts, themes, or categories. Qualitative data are often used to gain a more in-depth understanding of a particular incident or phenomenon - answering how or why something is occurring. You might use a descriptive narrative or an anecdote.

Combining quantitative and qualitative data strengthens messages. When possible, collect both kinds of data and use them in your work because they serve two different functions when attempting to paint a complete picture of your issue. For example, you may collect quantitative data on percentage of youth who receive mental health care among those who need it and collect qualitative information through interviews, focus groups or surveys with open-ended questions about why some youth don’t receive the care they need.

**Kidsdata** is a program of the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health. Our website, kidsdata.org, is a public resource with comprehensive data on children’s health in California. Content for this document is adapted from the Kidsdata Community Workshop, co-hosted with UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.