



Healthy Public Policy Toolkit: Understanding & Engaging in Healthy Public Policy

This document is part of the Healthy Public Policy (HPP) Toolkit.

Public Health, both a science and an art, is concerned with improving the health of populations through organized efforts of society. Public Health recognizes the influences of social, environmental, political and economic conditions on health and health equity (as seen in Figure 1). These conditions are influenced in part by public policies, and as such, public policy provides an opportunity for improving population health. This is illustrated in the Canadian Public Health Association's recent framework (2016) that places the social determinants of health, health equity, and social justice as the foundations of public health. ¹

Background

Public policies have improved population health throughout history. The 1800s saw clean water and sanitation, the early 1900s brought disease prevention policies such as food safety and sewage disposal. Labour laws in the mid-late 1900s improved workplace safety. Today, policies such as Rent Assist and the Canada Child Benefit help to address adequate income. Public Health's approach to public policy has evolved over time as seen in Figure 2. Public policy knowledge and skills continue to be core competencies for Public Health practice in Canada.

Purpose

- Describe public policy & healthy public policy
- Describe Population & Public Health steps to engage in healthy public policy
- Describe Population & Public Health roles in healthy public policy

Figure 1
Social Ecological Model of Public Health

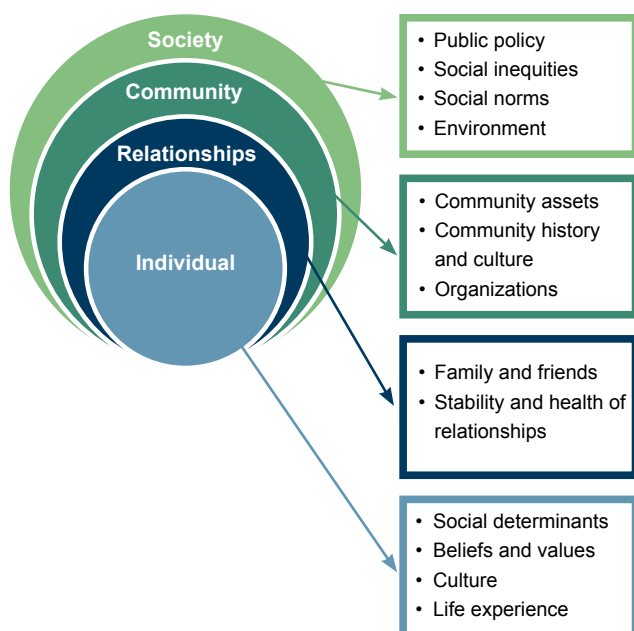
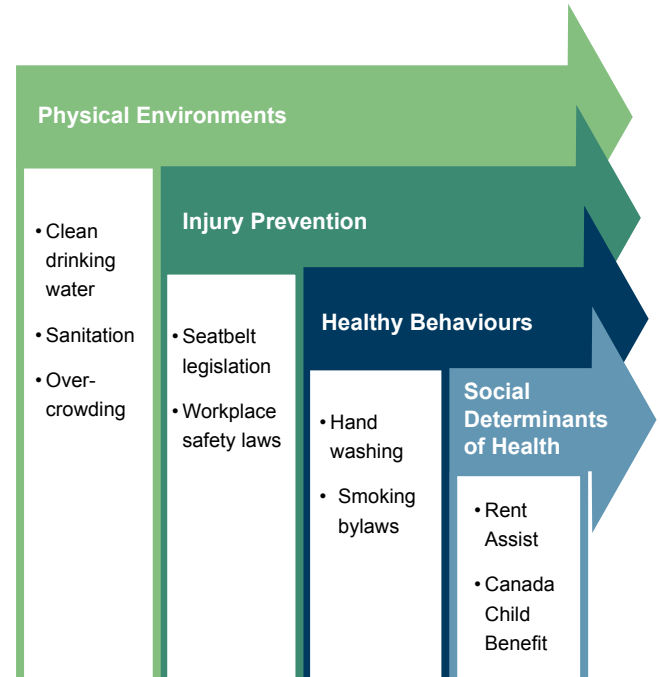


Figure 2
Evolution of Public Policies & Public Health



Part 1

What is public policy?

Many types of policies exist within different aspects of our society, such as organizational, practice and private policies. However, the unique element of public policy is the level of decision-making. Public policies are authoritative decisions made by public authorities.

In the Canadian context, public authorities are municipal, provincial or federal governments. Governments have several functions, as seen in Table 1. Public policies are intended to direct these functions which structure the social, environmental, political and economic conditions of society.

The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy ³ defines the concept of public policy as having two applications.

Public policy can be a **statement** or **strategic action**.

A public policy statement “defines one or more problems affecting a population or one or more groups within it”. ³ Within a public policy statement, objectives, principles and criteria for action are identified. Public policy statements guide government strategies, action plans, and decisions. They also give direction to public and private organizations authorized to act in the public good.⁴ Public policy can also take the form of strategic action led by a public authority (alone or in partnership) to address a situation or events that are affecting the population. ³ Strategic action can include several government functions to affect or change the identified situation, such as regulation, structure of rights, subsidies, etc.

Table 1: Government Functions

| |
|--|
| Taxation |
| Regulation |
| Subsidies |
| Service Provision |
| Agency Budgets |
| Structure of Rights |
| Framework of Economic Activity |
| Financing and Contracting ² |

Public Policy Statement Examples:

- City of Winnipeg’s [Garbage and Recycling Master Plan](#) aims to increase waste diversion rates (i.e. the amount of waste that is diverted from landfill for recycling).
- City of Winnipeg’s [OurWinnipeg](#), the development plan by-law for Winnipeg, guides decisions about how land is used and neighbourhoods are designed. This is required by a provincial charter and is led and implemented by the City. It outlines strategies, tools and approaches to reach the identified vision of the plan.

Public Policy Strategic Action Example:

- [Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries Act](#) determines how and when liquor can be sold in Manitoba and the social responsibility requirements of the liquor and lotteries corporation.

Understanding Healthy Public Policy

Recognizing that health is determined by more than health services, healthy public policy shifts attention from the planning, funding and delivery of healthcare services alone, to the broader structural and social determinants of health. Essentially, healthy public policy questions the givens of public society.

Trevor Hancock asked in 1985 in his paper *Beyond Health Care: From Public Health Policy to Healthy Public Policy*, “Why do we have to structure our society in such a way as to create ill health? Is there a way to structure our society so as to create health?”⁵

To answer these questions, healthy public policy approaches both:

- analyze existing public policies with an impact on health equity and population health, and
- identify policy approaches to improve health equity and population health.

As many of the determinants of health lie outside the domain of the health sector, such as housing, income, and physical environments, healthy public policy approaches cross multiple policy domains. As such, partnerships and collaboration with other sectors such as education, transportation, urban planning, among others, continue to be a priority for public health practice.

“Healthy public policy is characterized by an explicit concern for health and equity in all areas of policy and by accountability for health impact.”⁶

“Healthy public policy improves the conditions under which people live: secure, safe, adequate and sustainable livelihoods, lifestyles, and environment, including, housing, education, nutrition, information exchange, child care, transportation, and necessary community and personal social and health services.”⁷

Policy Development

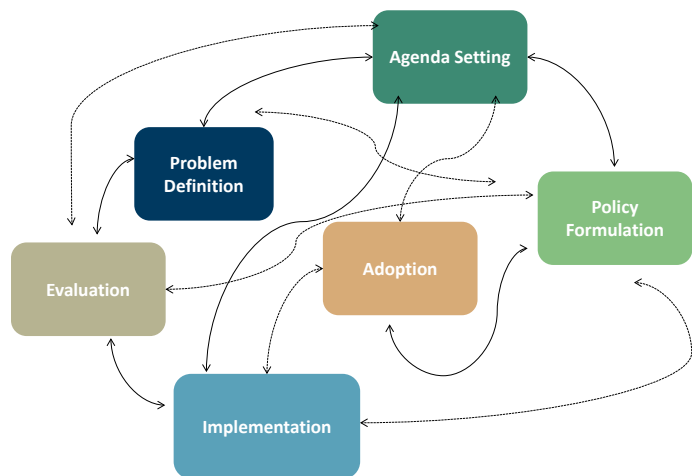
Public policy development occurs externally to the WRHA. It is often described as a policy cycle. However, as policy is inherently political, policy development is not circular, let alone linear. Rather policy development is a web of interconnected actions, influences and outcomes. Policy-making on a government level is complex as it includes many actors and processes.

These vary depending on the level of government and can be fluid with ongoing reorganization. However, there are identifiable components of the policy development process. These are:

- problem definition
- agenda setting
- policy formulation
- adoption
- implementation
- evaluation

These stages of policy development “sometimes occur simultaneously, sometimes appear in inverse order and are sometimes rapidly skirted”.⁸ The stages can be thought of as “moments in the life of a policy” and often follow a more haphazard-looking pattern, as seen in figure 3. Each stage has associated activities and tasks, many which overlap.

Figure 3
Policy Development Stages



*Adapted from: Stages in Policymaking: A Turbulent Flow*⁸

Part 2

Engaging in Healthy Public Policy

Policy development cycles will largely be driven externally. Population and Public Health's involvement in healthy public policy has its own internal steps. These will interact with the broader public policy development cycle, and be informed by the social and political context. Figure 4 depicts the internal PPH healthy public policy steps.

External Context

Healthy public policy is influenced by the political and social contexts. To be effective in influencing healthy public policy, PPH requires an understanding of these. This is achieved through community engagement, partnerships with other sectors, and monitoring political environments.

Internal Context

Healthy public policy development should reflect the organization's principles, values and priorities. Both the WRHA and PPH contexts will inform this work.

Roles & Responsibilities:

Influencing healthy public policy occurs through collective action. It requires diverse skills and knowledge and will engage practitioners across the PPH team. The role of individual practitioners will differ depending on the scope and function of the position.

Coordination:

Internal coordination uses the relevant knowledge, experience, and full scope of practice of staff to support policy action. Internal coordination and communication keeps internal stakeholders informed as needed and involved as necessary. This approach helps to ensure consistency and effectiveness and minimizes duplication across PPH, including centralized and community areas. For more details on internal coordination, see details about the [Healthy Public Policy Issues Process](#).

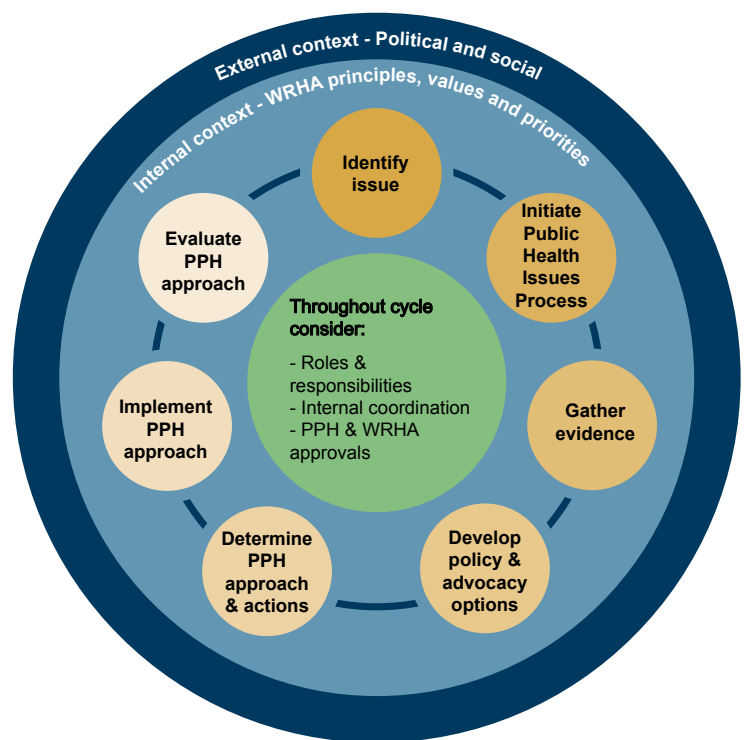
Collective PPH Healthy Public Policy Steps

Table 2 provides more detail on the PPH healthy public policy steps. These steps outline what we do collectively, not the steps that any one individual would take. Individual practitioners will have specific roles to contribute to the policy steps.

The [Public Health Nurse Professional Practice Model](#)⁹ should be consulted for further details on PHN-specific roles.

Figure 4

Collective PPH Healthy Public Policy Steps



Adapted from: Toronto Public Health Healthy Public Policy Cycle

Table 2

PPH Roles in Healthy Public Policy Steps

| PPH Policy Step | Process to Action | Examples of Roles |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Identify Issue | <p>Identify public health issues that have a potential policy solution and existing public policies with negative impacts on health.</p> <p>Policy issues can be identified through PPH central and community areas, community partners, and the broader health care system.</p> | <p>Community areas and front line staff: Identify and describe issues that arise from clients & practice.</p> <p>Centralized staff: Identify and describe issues from stakeholder engagement, scanning external factors</p> <p>See policy input map for more details.</p> |
| Initiate Public Health Issues Process | Use process for determining who could lead work, who could support, and who should know about this. | See Public Health Issues Process |
| Gather Evidence | <p>Gather information that could inform policy options.</p> <p>What is evidence? Evidence model</p> | <p>Front line staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen and convey the experiences and voices of community and clients. • Apply experience from practice. • Bring forward recommendations from community partners. <p>Content experts (e.g., clinical nurse specialists, medical officers of health, program specialists, dietitians):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather evidence from published and grey literature. • Explore learnings from other jurisdictions. • Examine health indicators. |
| Develop policy and advocacy options | <p>Policy options may include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An existing policy with a negative impact on health needs to be stopped. 2. An existing policy needs to be changed. 3. A new policy needs to be enacted. <p>Note: Policy solutions may not be mutually exclusive; a combination of policy solutions may be required to address an issue.</p> | <p>Lead group (as determined through PH Issues Process):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically appraise evidence on health issue and effective policy approaches. • Describe potential policy solutions and health impacts. |

| PPH Policy Step | Process to Action | Examples of Roles |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Determine PPH approach and actions | <p>The issue itself; the political and social context; and PPH values and priorities will inform the approach to engaging in policy.</p> <p>If required, develop an advocacy strategy.</p> | <p>Lead group (as determined through PH Issues Process):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore public policy context. How does the government view the issue? What is the relative importance to them? (Content experts) • Determine the public policy processes and timelines related to this issue (Content experts) • Determine who is involved in this issue. Who are the key relevant players – decision makers, advisors, and stakeholders? (Content experts and frontline staff) • Describe precedents. Have other governments made the change you are advocating for? What were the outcomes? (Content experts and frontline staff) • Explore the formal and informal politics. Who are the potential champions for this issue? Are there sensitivities around the issue to be aware of? (Content experts) |
| Implement PPH approach | Determine key activities, timelines and required WRHA approvals. | <p>Lead group (as determined through PH Issues Process):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine who will lead each activity. • Obtain appropriate approvals. |
| Evaluate PPH approach | <p>Determine what we want to measure</p> <p>To what extent did we implement the planned actions (process)?</p> <p>Did we achieve the change we were aiming for?</p> <p>Did it have the desired impact (outcome)? What is the community's perspective?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead group (as determined through PH Issues Process): • Develop evaluation questions for the process and outcomes. • Gather data, including community voice. • Communicate findings with PPH program and partners including community. |

PPH & WRHA Approvals Guidelines

- Be thoughtful; include PPH consultation and system checks. If in doubt, check with your manager.
- Obtain appropriate Population & Public Health and WRHA approvals such as PPH Director and Medical Director, and VP where appropriate.
- Adhere to WRHA and program policies and guidelines including but not limited to:

[Media Relations Policy](#) – WRHA

[Conflict of Interest Policy](#) – WRHA

[Clarifying and Learning from Partnerships](#) – PPH

[Health Equity- the language we use](#) – PPH

[Operational Guideline - Social Marketing for Health Communication](#) – PPH

Conclusion

Healthy public policy is an important approach to increase health equity and improve population health. Policy development is a complex process, with many actors and influencers. PPH can influence healthy public policy development through a team approach that brings together practitioners with diverse skills and knowledge. Your contribution to public health and policy development can make a significant difference in the health, well-being and resilience of the populations you serve. Working together we can influence the opportunities for all people to achieve their full health potential as a resource for meaningful and happy lives.

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