

Good Policy: A Marathon, Not a Sprint A Case Study on Vermont

On May 16, 2013, Governor Shumlin of Vermont signed a bill which provides funds to cover the cost of reduced price lunches for low-income students. By providing the \$320,000, the state of Vermont is the first state to provide free lunches to all qualifying students by eliminating the reduced-price category. The implementation of this important legislation was the culmination of years' worth of work by SNA-Vermont, Hunger-Free Vermont, and the Vermont Department of Education. This successful marriage of positive legislation with appropriations is a good example of how laying the groundwork with solid information along with beneficial partnerships can result in feeding more food-insecure students. Below are some helpful steps and ideas for your state to do similar work on your key issues.

Educate – Lay the Groundwork

Don't be fooled – this first step can be the hardest as it requires time and effort to introduce yourself and the school nutrition programs to key government officials. In Vermont, the organizations reached out to members of the legislative body, the Governor and Lieutenant Governor, and high level staff at the Vermont Department of Education. The primary goal is to establish your credibility as the expert in this area as you are the operator and implementer of all policies established at the federal, state, and local level. Here are a few key steps to remember:

- Be positive. Even if there are points that you find unworkable, it is best to be known as a person or group willing to find solutions.
- Find out who the key decision makers are – chairs of the important committees, head of the Child Nutrition Division, staff for the Governor – and consider sending an introductory letter explaining your work and the mission of SNA.
- Tell your story – and that of your students – with anecdotes and facts. When something good happens in your school, city, or state, do not hesitate to share as you want them to see the benefits of the programs for which they are responsible.
- Be open. If feasible, offer to let them visit your cafeteria during a meal time. Do you have a school garden? Ask if they want to dig in the ground. Operation a summer feeding program? Ask if they would like to help serve a meal.

It is always possible that your stated goal can be passed within one legislative session, but in case that does not happen, be proud that you have established relationships that will help you and your students down the road.

Information – Improve Your Base

Part of Vermont's success was that in 2008/2009, it implemented a similar policy for breakfast in which all qualifying students had access to a free morning meal. As the program began, the partner organizations collected data to see track any benefits, costs, and problems schools faced. By collecting

this information, SNA Vermont and Hunger-Free Vermont were better able to provide a picture of the true costs and benefits of implementing the lunch program.

For your own program, it is best to be as proactive as possible. As time allows or utilizing the resources of SNA, consider what other information could be helpful in your work. Keeping the conversation going at a reasonable rate can only help firm up support and provide avenues of information for policy makers.

- Gather as much data as feasible – utilize local, state, and federal resources. Mine your co-workers and fellow food service workers for information and stories.
- Don't be afraid to ask what *doesn't* work as well as what does. Knowing the full picture can help structure a better program in the future.
- Money. What does it cost and what would you need at bare minimum to make something work? What else could the state or local government get with the same amount of money? It is often helpful to have comparisons.

Build Your Network – Improve Your Mileage

Before the Vermont legislation was passed, Gov. Shumlin announced his goal of providing funds to cover the cost of reduced meals in his 2013 State of the State Address. By defining it as a primary goal for the year, the Governor gave leverage to this issue on which SNA Vermont and Hunger-Free Vermont were able to capitalize. Staff at the Vermont Department of Education also gave commitments to work on [®] moving the policy forward. Having established themselves as key sources for information on hunger and the benefits of the school nutrition programs, the leadership of both organizations were able to testify before House and Senate Committees. While the legislation did pass both Chambers, it was not smooth sailing as there was strong discussion on the merits of allocating funds. For a few months, the bill was caught up in budget battles before finally being signed into law by Gov. Shumlin.

Part of the success was the connections SNA Vermont and Hunger-Free Vermont made over the years. Finding advocates is vital because if they understand the issue from all sides, they will be far more likely to advocate for you. By being a reliable source of information and making the stated goal of expanding funds to cover reduced meals for lunch as well as breakfast, the Vermont partners were able to help set up a perfect political structure to move the policy forward.

- Make it a bi-partisan effort – you never know who will end up in a decision making position!
- Be consistent and positive. If providing testimony, stick to the facts illustrated by touching anecdotes. Understand you might receive pushback and be prepared to answer questions.
- Make sure your partner organizations are on message.

The Finish Line!

Developing good policy is rarely an overnight phenomenon – and bills that do move rapidly through the system tend to need tweaks or face serious concerns once implemented. As the Vermont bill shows, good policy which benefits students and you plus is political palatable is the culmination of years of

work. It sounds intimidating but it can be done – advocating for your school nutrition program is what you do every day. SNA State Policy is available to help structure advocacy plans, testimony, letters, and any other needs for you and your programs.



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