

MEDIA TOOLKIT

A guide to effective communications strategy



290 Pratt Street, Meriden, CT 06450
(203) 639-0550 * info@healthcare4every1.org
www.healthcare4every1.org * www.universalhealthct.org



Guidelines and Tips for Working With the Media

As with other forms of advocacy, the key to success with media relations centers on the relationships you have built. The relationship between your organization and the local media is an important aspect of the broader communications umbrella. Building an ongoing relationship with your local media takes place over time and requires ongoing commitment. It's important for you to proactively reach out to the media and respond when they reach out to you. This will pay off when you will need to promote an issue within the community. If a professional relationship with local media contacts already exists, you are ahead of the game. Just remember, as with all relationships, it requires ongoing attention and care. With that said, here are some very basic pointers to assist with media relations in your community.

1. **Develop an internal policy.** Address how your organization will respond to calls from the media and familiarize all staff and volunteers with the policy.
2. **Identify and prepare a media contact and spokesperson.** Sometimes this is the same person, but either way, the spokesperson must be well-versed on the subject and available to speak with the reporter on the reporter's schedule and deadline. Post the contact information in all of your media materials and, where appropriate, on your website. Make it easy for the media to reach you.
3. **Do your research.** Conduct Internet research on the reporter; know what they do and what topics they cover. See if they have a blog and connect on a personal level if you can. Also, call at the right time — watch their deadlines.
4. **Focus on a few key points when communicating with the media.** Keep it simple and clear and avoid jargon and acronyms.
5. **Emphasize the local angle or hook.** The media are concerned with issues that affect their readers, viewers, or listeners. You should be able to clearly answer the question that news editor always ask: Why should I care?
6. **Use your resources.** Make sure key reporters have the information they need to tell your story — a press release, fact sheet, brochure, etc.
7. **Be clear about the story you're pitching.** Make sure that what you tell the reporter is what you want to see in a story. If you are unhappy with the way you have phrased something, stop and rephrase or clarify your original statement.
8. **Don't waste the time of local media if there isn't any news value in an issue.** However, the work of your organization is important to the community, so make sure you keep the media informed of important activities when they do occur. The ability to judge what's important and what's not is critical to successful media relations.



Guidelines and Tips for Working With the Media (cont.)

Do

- ✓ Make sure your story is newsworthy and relevant to the reporter and/or outlet. Tailor your pitch to the specific reporter and publication.
- ✓ Prepare carefully before contacting the media about an issue — know the facts about an issue and use your key messages and materials to shape the discussion.
- ✓ Be on time and brief, using short words and simple, declarative sentences.
- ✓ Have a list of questions and answers prepared in advance — this can help you in responding to possible questions from a reporter.
- ✓ Decide in advance the questions you cannot answer — remember, you don't have to answer every question a reporter asks. Should this happen, steer the reporter back to one of your key messages.
- ✓ Ask for clarification if you do not understand a question.
- ✓ Remember that reporters cover a wide range of issues and might not recognize the importance of the issue at hand — it's your job to help explain this.
- ✓ Be prepared to offer additional materials such as pictures, background information, and sources which they may need to complete a story.
- ✓ Feel free to discreetly stop an interview if the person becomes distressed. Any reporter would understand the need to do this.
- ✓ Keep a record in your media database of what stories you pitch and to whom. This will provide you with a log of reporter interests and particular requirements that may aid in working with the reporter in the future.
- ✓ Retry, re-pitch but DO NOT harass a reporter. However, you should consider different angles which strike different interest if one method is not working. If you come up with a new angle or development, feel free to pitch the story to the reporter again.
- ✓ Offer feedback when appropriate. If a story contains a major error (not simply a phrasing that you might not particularly like but that is accurate) bring it to the attention of the reporter.
- ✓ Be careful about being overly effusive with a reporter, but if you like a story they covered, send a short thank you note.

Don't

- × Speak “off the record.”
- × Ask to review a reporter's story prior to publication.
- × Mislead reporters with false information.
- × Answer a question with “no comment.” There's always a way to refocus on one of your key talking points.
- × Try to answer hypothetical questions.
- × Be afraid to say you do not know the answer, but do say you will try to find out.
- × Schedule a press conference unless you have breaking news that merits coverage.

2



Guidelines and Tips for Working With the Media (cont.)

General Interview Tips

- ☆ Speak in sound bites—short quotes that communicate the gist of your message. If you want to make sure you are quoted accurately, repeat your message 3 times in different ways. Repeating your message over and over won't bore your end audience—it will get the point to them.
- ☆ Remember that the person you are communicating with isn't the reporter, but the people who will read the story the next day.
- ☆ They ask questions, you give answers—two separate events. You never have to answer a question directly, or even at all. Bridge back to your key messages quickly with a prefatory statement like, “The important issue is...”
- ☆ If a reporter asks you a detailed, multi-part question, focus on answering the one question that leads you back to your key messages. Don't say, “first...second,” because they'll want to cut some quotes out.
- ☆ Journalists are not your friends, they are a conduit for your message. This is even more important to remember with friendly journalists you may have a previous relationship with.
- ☆ Bring pad and paper to print and radio interviews.
- ☆ Speak slowly. If a reporter is writing madly, slow down, then repeat the exact quote again.
- ☆ Be calm and serious. Strive to appear more reasonable than your opponents.
- ☆ Don't use sarcasm; it doesn't translate well in the media, especially in print.
- ☆ Avoid using jargon, acronyms or insider vocabulary.
- ☆ Don't overwhelm a reporter with too many facts. That gives them more quotes to choose from than you may want.
- ☆ Never say “no comment,” it sounds like you have something to hide. It's better to tell a reporter that you're unclear about the answer based on your current understanding of the information, and that you'll get back to them right away.
- ☆ Assume everything you say is on the record unless you have a very specific agreement otherwise. Just because the pencil has been put away doesn't mean that the reporter might not use something you say on the way to the door. If you don't want something to be quoted, don't say it at all. Don't go “off the record” if you don't trust the reporter.

Preparation

- ☆ For future interviews: if a reporter calls you, never agree to an interview right at that moment. Give yourself time to develop your talking points. Ask the reporter the nature of the interview, the other people they will be interviewing for the story, and when the deadline is.
- ☆ Get familiar with the outlet with which you'll be interviewing. What is its political slant? Who is its audience? Do some research and read a couple of articles written by the reporter with whom you'll be speaking.



Writing an Effective Press Release

A well-crafted press release captures the attention of journalists and is optimized for distribution over the Internet through e-mail. Pay attention to the content of your press release. Keep the following points in mind when writing your press release:

- ☆ **Is your news "newsworthy?"** The purpose of a press release is to inform the world of your news item. A good press release answers all of the "W" questions (who, what, where, when and why), providing the media with useful information about your organization, product, service or event.
- ☆ **Start strong.** Your headline and first paragraph should tell the story. The rest of your press release should provide the detail. You have a matter of seconds to grab your readers' attention. Do not blow it with a weak opening.
- ☆ **Write for the media.** On occasion, media outlets, especially online media, will pick up your press release and run it in their publications with little or no modification. More commonly, journalists will use your press release as a springboard for a larger feature story. In either case, try to develop a story as you would like to have it told. Even if your news is not reprinted verbatim, it may provide an acceptable amount of exposure. But remember, not everything is news. Your excitement about something does not necessarily mean that you have a newsworthy story. Think about your audience. Will someone else find your story interesting? Answer the question, "Why should anyone care?"
- ☆ **Pick an angle.** Try to make your press release timely. Tie your news to current events or social issues if possible. Make sure that your story has a good news hook.
- ☆ **Use active, not passive, voice.** The active voice brings your press release to life. Rather than writing "entered into a partnership" use "partnered." Do not be afraid to use strong verbs. For example, "The committee exhibited severe hostility over the incident." reads better if changed to "The committee was enraged over the incident." Writing in this manner, helps guarantee that your press release will be read.
- ☆ **Use only enough words to tell your story.** Avoid using unnecessary adjectives, flowery language, or redundant expressions such as "first time ever." If you can tell your story with fewer words, do it. Wordiness distracts from your story. Keep it concise.

Formatting Tips for Your Press Release:

- ✓ Mixed case. NEVER SUBMIT A PRESS RELEASE IN ALL UPPER CASE LETTERS. This is very bad form. Use mixed case.
- ✓ Correct grammar usage. Always follow rules of grammar and style. Errors in grammar and style affect your credibility.



Sample Press Release

For Immediate Release

February 25, 2010

Contact: Janet Davenport, 203.639.0550 cell: 860.989.4220

DEATHS FROM LACK OF HEALTH COVERAGE REPORT: A SOBERING CALL FOR HEALTH REFORM

Meriden – Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut today released a statement calling the new Families USA Report “Lives on the Line” a stark reminder that the consequences of not fixing the broken health care system are too great to ignore.

“We’ve all known for far too long that spiraling health care costs are crippling Connecticut families and businesses,” said Frances Padilla, the foundation’s acting president. “‘The Lives on the Line’ report paints a grim picture of the human cost we face if we fail to fix our health care system.” Padilla said that the foundation has joined health care reformers across the state and the country urging Congress to finish the job of passing meaningful reform.

“Passing national reform not only will save lives but also will put Connecticut at a competitive advantage because we have a new health reform law that was designed to anticipate and capitalize on national health reform,” Padilla said.

The foundation and a broad-based coalition of business, labor and clergy leaders as well as health care providers and advocates successfully pushed passage last year of health care reform legislation called Sustinet. According to foundation officials, the new law will provide an affordable public health insurance choice and make quality, affordable health care a reality for everyone in the state.

“Having insurance coverage improves health outcomes and reduces and eliminates racial and ethnic disparities in access to quality care.”

“Those with quality health care are more likely to seek health care screenings and are less likely to forgo needed medical care. The Families USA report is another reminder of the importance of passing meaningful reform,” Padilla said.

Key Findings of the Report:

- An estimated 1700 Connecticut adults from 25-64 years old will die due to lack of coverage from 2010-2019 if reform is not passed
- In the 15-year period since our nation last debated health reform (1995-2009), more than 294,000 American adults (25-64 years old) died prematurely due to a lack of health coverage (2100 from Connecticut)
- Uninsured adults are 25 percent more likely to die prematurely than adults with private health insurance. Uninsured Americans between 55 and 64 years of age are at much greater risk of premature death than their insured counterparts. This makes uninsurance the third leading cause of death for the near-elderly, following heart disease and cancer

###



Writing a News Advisory

A news advisory is designed to inform a reporter or editor about an upcoming news conference or event.

- ☆ The advisory should include the **date, time, place, and purpose** of the news conference. If there are important speakers or exemplary visuals, the advisory should mention those as well.
- ☆ The advisory should not tell the whole story. If it does, nobody will bother to come to the conference itself. Writing the advisory should not take long.
- ☆ Like a news release, an advisory should be proofread by at least two people before being distributed.
- ☆ The advisory should be faxed or emailed out 2 days ahead of time.
- ☆ The bulk of the time should be spent conducting follow-up calls after the advisory has been sent out.
- ☆ Email and re-fax the advisory if necessary.



Sample News Advisory

PRESS ADVISORY:
September 10, 2009

Contact: John Murphy (860)995-3389

**PRESS EVENT TO REACT TO PRESIDENT OBAMA'S
HEALTH CARE ADDRESS TO CONGRESS**
Major Protest Against Health Insurance Industry Announced

WHEN: TODAY - Thursday, September 10, 2009
12:30 PM

WHERE: Center Church on the Green
311 Temple Street
New Haven, CT 06511

The Connecticut chapter of Health Care for America Now (HCAN), a coalition of community, faith based and labor organizations, will hold a press event to respond to President Obama's health care address to Congress last night and announce a major action against health insurance companies to be held on Tuesday, September 22 in the fight to win health care reform.

Among the speakers today on the Green will be Reverend Sandra Olsen, Pastor of Center Church on the Green; John Olsen, President of the Connecticut AFL-CIO and Connecticut HCAN Co-Chair; Juan Figueroa, President of Universal Health Foundation of Connecticut; and Jennifer Just, Connecticut Lead Organizer for Organizing for America.

Phil Sherwood, Deputy Director of the Connecticut Citizen Action Group (CCAG) said affordability must be the cornerstone of health care reform – and to make health care affordable, insurance companies must be held accountable. “Without a public health insurance option, the health insurance companies win and the American people lose.”

###



Writing a Letter to the Editor

1. **Process:** Submitting Letters to the Editor (LTEs) is much easier than submitting op-eds. LTEs should be seen as fallbacks to submitting op-eds. Most newspapers state their policies for submitting LTEs in the paper (usually on the opinion page). Make sure you follow their procedures exactly. Follow-up with the editor of the letters page to be sure s/he received your letter, that it meets their requirements and to ask when they are planning to print it. Make sure you have a strategy for who signs it – whether it is a local leader, ally, local official, or an average citizen. Then, you'll want a spate of letters from local activists. These can't be identical although they need to express a consistent message. In addition to focusing on major dailies, be sure to get your message out to small papers too. In fact, small papers are often the easiest venues to get a LTE published.
2. **Content:** What is true for op-eds is true for LTEs. However, a couple of additional points are highlighted below:
 - ☆ Make one clear point in your letter and stick to it!
 - ☆ Convey your outrage, but avoid exaggeration. With LTEs, it is fine to express feelings of anger or of frustration but avoid overstatement, hyperbole, and hysteria.
 - ☆ If you can tie your letter to a recent article in the paper it is more likely to be printed.
 - ☆ Use your personal experience. Express your concern about the issue in your own way.
 - ☆ Short letters get printed. Clever letters get read!
3. **Sample Outline:**
 1. State the problem/topic (why you personally are concerned). “Small businesses are the key to economic growth and recovery, but rising health care costs hamper entrepreneurial efforts.”
 2. Embellish the problem to make it more real for the reader.
 3. State the solution both generally and specifically. “Health care costs should not be so burdensome that businesses are forced to close their doors, lay off workers or cut off all benefits. If we want economic recovery and job growth for tomorrow we need health care reform today.”
 4. Summary: A single, well written sentence wins your audience.



Sample Letters to the Editor

Sample Letter 1

To the Editor,

There was a joke in which God was asked if there'd ever be health care reform in the United States and He replied, "Yes, but not in my lifetime." Well, we can now retire that joke thanks to the courage and commitment of our members of Congress, Joe Courtney and Chris Dodd.

As a physician, I wasn't sure I'd see the day during my professional lifetime that all my patients would be free of the worry of being bankrupt after being treated for serious illness or having to make the decision whether to buy food or medicine. The just-enacted health reform bill takes us a lot closer to achieving those goals.

Thank you Rep. Courtney, Senator Dodd, and President Obama.

Sincerely,

Stephen R. Smith, M.D.

Sample Letter 2

To the Editor,

As a small business owner, I followed the vote on health care Sunday with one certainty in mind: we can't afford the cost of doing nothing. If we failed to pass real health reform, small businesses would continue to face off-the-charts rate increases and routine discrimination from health insurers. More and more small businesses would be forced to cut coverage, lay off employees or close our doors for good because of rising health care costs. Thankfully, Rep. XX and the Congress rose to the challenge and got the job done. The package they passed will end discrimination against small businesses by insurance companies, give us more choices and help us get affordable coverage. Here in Connecticut, SustiNet, which passed into law July 2009, continues to move forward. The SustiNet Board is working hard to design the SustiNet system. The federal reform bill will work hand-in-hand with SustiNet. With SustiNet and federal reform, affordable, quality health care coverage will be within all of our reach. It's time to bring health care reform to market so small businesses will be able to benefit from these critical changes.

Rick Lopes,

CMS Construction



Writing an Op-Ed

1. **Process:** By closely monitoring the opinion pages, you can get a sense of the types of articles run by the editor. Pay close attention to any pieces on your issue or by your peers. Talk to those who have had success – get a sense of what worked for them. The normal process is to submit a typed, double-spaced article (average length of 500 words) with a cover letter to the Editorial Page Editor. Find out and keep in mind the protocol for submitting to sets of papers. For example, the Hartford Courant often is the first priority to receive the piece – if they run it, others may also run it. On the other hand, if it is being run by other, less known papers, the Hartford Courant won't cover it. Some papers only will print an op-ed when it is agreed by the author that they will not shop it elsewhere for publication.

Follow up ruthlessly: Did they get it, will they print it (and when), can you adjust it to their specifications?

2. **Angle:** Find an interesting angle from which you can approach your topic. This is usually the most difficult part of the effort. Editors are looking for immediacy, name recognition, creative angles on a topic, or controversy. Getting a coalition partner, VIP or legislator to co-sign definitely helps get coverage.
3. **Structure and accuracy:** Here are a set of tips for writing an op-ed:
 - ☆ Hook the reader in the first couple of paragraphs, whether it's by beginning with an interesting anecdote or question, a provocative statement or a colorful quote.
 - ☆ Make ample use of anecdotes and quotes throughout; they keep the reader going.
 - ☆ Wherever possible, show rather than tell – it's more convincing.
 - ☆ Come up with local angles and examples.
 - ☆ If you can do it naturally, tie the end of the article to the beginning.
 - ☆ Scrupulously maintain the focus of your theme; don't digress.
 - ☆ Back up your assertions with facts and double-check them. Make sure your quotes are accurate in both the actual words and the context in which they were used.
 - ☆ Don't overstate anything; overstatement creates distrust in the reader's mind.
 - ☆ Anticipate questions a reader might have and try to answer them in advance.

