

A Place at the Table, a Voice in the Conversation: CHARTING A COURSE OF POLICY CHANGE

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Since its earliest days, the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky has set its sights on making lasting policy change. Policies shape environments that can either support or undermine healthy living; policies can advantage or disadvantage some of us in ways that create inequities—disparities in access to care and in elements of our lives and our communities that contribute to a healthy life.

Foundations can move policy as a trusted convener; we can educate and inform policymakers regarding what we learn from pilot projects and research studies we have funded; we can demystify regulatory and legislative processes for grantees and others who want a place at the policymaking table and a voice in policy conversations.

HOW DO WE DO THIS?

- ▶ **It begins with our board.** Who is on the board? Do board members represent the communities we seek to serve? Do they understand the factors that advantage—and disadvantage—Kentuckians? Do they understand the ways in which “policy work” is different from other forms of grantmaking? Do they understand that this important work may not “feel good” in the short run, but makes a big difference in the long run?
- ▶ **Health advocacy.** The foundation has entered into multiyear relationships with effective statewide health policy advocacy organizations—funded not because of what they promise to do, but because of past successes and alignment of their policy priorities with our own. We know policy change happens when preparation meets opportunity—logic models help us identify intermediate steps in the policy change process. We see power in policy change at the corporate, school district, regulatory, and community levels: Kentucky’s legislature has not passed a statewide smoke-free law, for example, yet one-third of Kentuckians now live in communities with comprehensive smoke-free ordinances, a growing number of school districts are now 24/7 tobacco-free environments, state government buildings are smoke-free by executive order, and universities and hospitals have embraced tobacco-free campus policies. The foundation has adopted a policy framework that values pre-policy groundwork, policy development, implementation, and monitoring.
- ▶ **Informed by present realities.** We joke at the foundation that we bring light and let others bring heat to policy work. The light is the health data, polling, research, and analysis we fund. For example, we currently contract with State Health Access Data Assistance Center to assess the impacts of Kentucky’s decision to operate its own health insurance exchange—kynect—and to expand Medicaid access as permitted under the Affordable Care Act. And, with funding partner Interact for Health, we fund an annual poll (Kentucky Health Issues Poll) designed to capture the views of Kentuckians and share them with elected and appointed policymakers.
- ▶ **With tools to engage.** The foundation partners with the Cabinet for Health and Family Services and the University of Kentucky to capture Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey data each year and populate a website—www.kentuckyhealthfacts.org—with county-level data for local decisionmakers. The foundation keeps a directory of known local health coalitions and targets a series of workshops and webinars to them and others in Kentucky who want to increase the effectiveness of their health efforts. For example, a recent session applied the skills of Alliance for Justice and the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy to help folks be clear on the differences between lobbying and other forms of advocacy, and to learn how the state budget process works—and how to influence it.
- ▶ **Sharing information, local stories.** Committing to policy work requires committing to communications work; unused information is a poor investment. In the foundation’s case, we both grew our internal

capacity by retaining a seasoned communications professional and provided financial support to key external media—[television](#), radio, print, and [web-based](#)—respected by policymakers. We respect their editorial autonomy, and they respect us as a source of credible content and linkages to experts able to comment on a range of health-related topics.

- ▶ **Building relationships.** There are no shortcuts in the trust-building process. As funders, we may be leery of others who approach us, wanting us to help carry their bucket of water. But is it our bucket too? When we can identify an alignment of missions, a shared interest in outcomes, a shared perspective on how systems are made more equitable and policies more inclusive, we have the basis for collective work. Building relationships with policymakers can be just as prickly. They are used to being approached by lobbyists and others who seek financial advantage for the programs and corporations they represent. We make clear our goal is simply to see Kentucky prosper by having a state full of healthier Kentuckians, with resources to stay healthy and timely access to the safe and effective care they need.
- ▶ **Seizing opportunities.** Katherine Pike, an early national policy advocate on alcohol abuse, taught me to look for the good and praise it. Call out and publicly thank policymakers and those who take policy steps to help Kentuckians live healthier lives, such as: lifting up the school that adopts a shared-use policy to permit better community access to safe places to play; the church or corporation that lets its parking lot be used for a farmers market; the restaurant that posts nutrition information; the city that restripes a wide road to include a bike lane. All show the policy changes others can make in their own communities. Sometimes a “policy opportunity” involves helping grantees to oppose an unhealthful policy change rather than support a new positive change. The foundation has both a “rapid response” fund and an [internal policy prioritization process](#) to determine when and to what extent we invest.
- ▶ **Learning from failures.** It does not always work. Kentucky enacted strong legislation eliminating competing “junk food” from schools, but only permitted, rather than requiring, physical education. One governor expanded Medicaid, adding nearly half a million Kentuckians to the ranks of those with health insurance; the next governor seeks to roll back that programmatic and financial commitment. Efforts to create a path to certification and reimbursement for community health workers are still a work in progress. Policy work calls for a compass, rather than a paved-road map. The true north of our compass is a three-fold test:
 - Will it improve access to health care for underserved Kentuckians?
 - Will it reduce health disparities?
 - Will it promote health equity?

Advancing toward this north, we improve the chances for Kentuckians to lead healthier lives, and for the state itself to prosper.

I will end with three platitudes that further describe how our policy and systems-change work unfolds:

- Let us dance with whoever is at the party. Yes, we strive for all communities affected by a proposed policy to have a voice in the decision. Still, it is the policymakers who will shape which policies get enacted, deferred, or scuttled. So let us find common cause and take what steps we can agree on, toward true north.
- We are not just breaking up rocks here—we are building a cathedral. Whether I first heard this from the foundation’s first board chair, Laurel True, or at a presentation by John Girard, author of *A Leader’s Guide to Information Management*, it is a shorthand reminder that the work we do in the policy-change quarry is intended to make Kentucky a healthier place for generations we may never meet.
- Be like water. Some equate this to the *wu wei* concept of Taoism, which I understand to be being in harmony with the world around you, behaving in a way aligned with nature. For me it is a reminder that, when water encounters an obstacle—say, a boulder in a stream—it does not stop. Instead it flows around, over—even under—the obstacle, moving smoothly toward its destination. Over time that

persistent stream of water erodes the rocks in its path, making the course smoother still for those who follow.

So take up the dance, break up the rocks, flow past the obstacles. The surest way to make lasting change in the environments where we and our children's children will live, work, learn, and play, is to invest our resources in lasting policy and environmental change.