

# Foundations AND the Media:

## Working Together to Get Out Health Messages

Local and national media outlets can help grantmakers inform and educate the public about important health issues and promote the work of their grantees. For many foundations, however, working with the media is uncharted territory. Although foundations may understand how health journalists can help inform public opinion and behavior, they might be concerned that the media may be seeking sensationalist stories or that poorly researched stories could distort or oversimplify complex health issues. Despite such concerns, even relatively small foundations have begun to harness the potential positive power of the media by establishing programs to educate journalists and partnering with organizations that have established media connections and the expertise to get the right message out and create the right impact. While some funders use communications and public relations firms for this purpose, there are other resources to help promote responsible and appropriate coverage of health issues in the media.

### PROMOTING AN ACCURATE, INDEPENDENT, AND BALANCED MESSAGE

A first step in establishing a more aggressive media presence is understanding the needs of health journalists and the environment in which they work. One useful resource for funders is the Association of Health Care Journalists (AHCJ), a non-profit national organization whose primary purpose is to improve the quality of health care journalism. Founded in 1997 by prominent health care journalists, the association now numbers nearly 800 members in 45 states and eight countries. Through annual national and regional conferences, and the publication of guidebooks and other reports, it aims to create a vibrant community of health journalists, raise the stature of health journalism, and advocate for the free flow of information to the public.

In 2004, AHCJ established the Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism to help train journalists to do a better job of covering all aspects of health care. The center has two guiding principles, the first of which is to promote news coverage about health and health care that is independent, fair, accurate, and balanced. The second is to foster understanding that high-quality health care journalism helps policymakers adopt policies that improve the health of the nation and helps citizens make informed decisions about their own health care.

Grantmakers can look to AHCJ as a resource for information on responsible health reporting and can help support the

mission of the organization through their own grantmaking. There are also opportunities for foundations to work with AHCJ to help inform health reporters and encourage responsible coverage of health issues.

### PARTNERING TO COMMUNICATE THE RIGHT MESSAGE

Successful partnerships between foundations and journalists are not cultivated overnight. The media often lack specific expertise and may not know what to ask or where to go for accurate information. The pressure of deadlines and the reality of having to cover multiple issues simultaneously makes these challenges especially daunting. Grantmaking organizations, on the other hand, may not know how to most effectively catch the attention of journalists by generating clear and concise leads.

Drawing on its relationship with the University of Texas at Austin School of Journalism, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health created an initiative to help affect the coverage of mental health issues in the Texas media. The first two-day seminar, held in October 2003, *No One's Priority: What Reporters Should Know About Youth Mental Health Services in Texas*, focused on educating reporters on the state of children's mental health services in Texas, improving their understanding of reforms made by the state legislature, and alerting them to needs and opportunities for children's mental health at the community level. The second seminar, held in October 2004, *Mental Illness and the Texas Criminal Justice System*, covered ways to improve the accuracy of reporting on mental health issues, increasing the range of available information and resources for reporters covering mental illness and crime, and identifying and acknowledging good practices in depicting mentally ill offenders. The foundation supported direct costs for the seminar, as well as travel scholarships. With the school of journalism, the foundation has also created *The James Stephen Hogg Award for Mental Health Reporting* to recognize exemplary journalism that informs, educates, or empowers the people of Texas on issues related to mental health and mental illness. More recently, the Hogg Foundation produced a documentary highlighting the struggles of living with and advocating for children with mental disorders. The production aired on public television stations around the state and was extremely successful at attracting media attention. Many local PBS stations went on to produce their own broadcasts about children's mental health.

## CREATING A COMPELLING MESSAGE FOR FOUNDATIONS AND GRANTEES

Foundations that wish to take a hands-on approach but lack the specific expertise required to build partnerships like that of the Hogg Foundation, might consider working with a group like Public Access Journalism (PAJ), an independent editorial consulting company that works to connect foundations with journalists and offers a national news service to draw attention to foundation issues.

With the help of freelance reporters, PAJ works with foundations and grantees to provide accurate, well-written, and objective ready-to-publish stories highlighting social change issues. The goal is to bring together, often for the first time, key local and national groups and partners working on a particular issue. Typically, projects include a customized Web site, e-newsletters, promotional materials, and activities that involve personal contact. PAJ has a close partnership with Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, a respected wire service owned by two of the country's largest media organizations, which facilitates nationwide distribution of stories. PAJ also works to disseminate stories through local outlets. By partnering with PAJ, grantmakers can garner national and local coverage of grantees and their work, provide for stronger grassroots partnerships, and heighten media and public awareness of social issues. PAJ also evaluates the series through personal, detailed surveys of newspaper editors, readers, and community groups.

Recently, PAJ worked with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, and the Charitable Leadership Foundation to produce two health-related projects. The first, entitled *Finding Our Way: Living with Dying in America*, explored the many complex issues that face seriously ill Americans, caregivers, and families. The second, *The Shape We're In*, primarily funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was designed to raise public awareness and provide innovative solutions to the overweight and obesity epidemic.

## GIVING JOURNALISTS THE KNOWLEDGE AND TOOLS TO COVER HEALTH ISSUES

Some health foundations are creating programs that give health journalists a chance to learn and connect. The Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation and other New England philanthropies, for example, support the *Health Coverage Fellowship*. Now in its fifth year, the program provides nine days of intensive training to a class of 10 reporters and editors from newspapers, radio stations, and television outlets across New England and serves as a model for foundation supported fellowships nationwide. The goal is to deepen journalists' understanding of the complex and changing world of medicine and health care, with an emphasis on the special problems facing low-income individuals and the uninsured. The fellowship includes training sessions and meetings with public officials, leading hospital and managed care executives,

medical researchers, health economists, and other critical players in the state's health care system. Journalist fellows learn the right questions to ask on their medical, business, or general assignment beats, and where to go for answers to critical state-level health issues, such as the uninsured and New England's growing nurse shortage. A fellowship Web resource allows fellows to communicate with each other and direct them to critical health resources.

Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut (UHCF) provided a \$50,000 seed grant to support The *Connecticut Online Health Care Journalism Project*. Using a slightly different model from the *Health Coverage Fellowship*, the project seeks to promote and steer the course of new journalism, encouraging the development of professional-quality so-called hyperlocal and issue-oriented on-line news Web sites. Spearheaded by veteran Connecticut journalist Paul Bass, the project supports reporting by professional journalists addressing the state's health care crises. The articles will appear on [www.newhavenindependent.org](http://www.newhavenindependent.org), a five-day-a-week on-line community newspaper that covers the city of New Haven. Other outlets served by the project include [ctnewjunkie.com](http://ctnewjunkie.com); [hamdendailynews.com](http://hamdendailynews.com); and *La Voz Hispana*, the state's largest-circulation Spanish language newspaper. The on-line journalism project is a nonpartisan and independent organization; its journalists prepare articles independently of UHCF and other funders. The business model is similar to public radio and television, seeking donations from individuals at a modest subscription-type monthly rate.

## RESOURCES

Association of Health Care Journalists, <http://www.ahcj.umnn.edu/>

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation Health Coverage Fellowship, [http://www.bcbsmafoundation.org/foundationroot/en\\_US/policyAndPrograms/policyPresent.jsp?repositoryId=Repositories.commonMainContent.policyAndPrograms.healthCoverageFellowship.xml](http://www.bcbsmafoundation.org/foundationroot/en_US/policyAndPrograms/policyPresent.jsp?repositoryId=Repositories.commonMainContent.policyAndPrograms.healthCoverageFellowship.xml)

Connecticut Online Health Care Journalism Project, <http://universalhealthct.org/>

Hogg Foundation's Mental Illness and the Texas Criminal Justice System Journalism Seminar, <http://www.hogg.utexas.edu:16080/jseminar.html>

Public Access Journalism, <http://www.pajournalism.com/>

Finding Our Way: Living with Dying in America, <http://www.findingourway.net/>

The Shape We're In, <http://www.shapenews.com/>