
OPTIMIZING THE PUBLIC'S ROLE IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC HEALTH

- Complex health problems in a larger and more diverse population
 - A global environment
 - Limited resources, power, and control
 - Invisibility
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THE COLLABORATIVE IMPERATIVE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

Partnering can:

- Broaden the reach and power of public health
 - Enhance the effectiveness of public health
 - Improve the visibility of public health
 - Build a stronger constituency for public health
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THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC HEALTH

- The central focus of our concern
 - The people we want to communicate with, educate, influence, mobilize, and empower
 - The people we want to benefit from our expertise, programs, and policies
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THE PUBLIC'S ROLE IN PUBLIC HEALTH

- Use PH services
 - Participate in PH programs
 - Follow PH advice and instructions
 - Change behavior
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IS THIS COLLABORATION?

- We want to influence the public, but is the public also influencing us?
 - Do they have knowledge that is needed to identify, understand, and address the issues they face?
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THE EXAMPLE OF EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

- The public is the *object* of concern, but strategies and plans are being developed *without* incorporating the public's knowledge.
 - Is this a problem?
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REDEFINING READINESS

- Looking at emergency preparedness through the eyes of the public
 - Research and local demonstrations
 - *www.redefiningreadiness.net*
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REDEFINING READINESS

EMERGENCIES

- Smallpox outbreak
 - Dirty bomb explosion
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EXPERT PLANS WON'T WORK

- **Smallpox outbreak:** only 43% of Americans would go to a public vaccination site
 - **Dirty bomb explosion:** only 59% would stay inside the building they are in
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THE EMERGENCY IS *NOT* THE ONLY RISK PEOPLE FACE

- Going to a public vaccination site is very dangerous for 50 million Americans at risk from the smallpox vaccine
 - Under current conditions, sheltering in place can be dangerous for the people inside and for others who depend on them
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PROTECTIVE STRATEGIES *CREATE* UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS

- Under current conditions, many people see no way to protect themselves and the other people, animals, and things they care about because the strategy designed to protect them from the emergency exposes them or their family members to other serious and previously unrecognized dangers
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A FUNDAMENTAL FLAW IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

- Planners are developing instructions for people to follow *without* finding out whether it is actually possible for them to do so or whether the instructions are even the most protective action for certain groups of people to take
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PLANNERS NEED THE PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE

- Without hearing from the public directly, planners can't possibly be aware of the barriers and risks that make it difficult for people to protect themselves
 - Lacking this knowledge, they are inadvertently developing instructions that aren't feasible or safe for many people to follow
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CONSEQUENCES OF PREPARING WITHOUT THE PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE

- In 2004, the *Redefining Readiness* study predicted that large numbers of people would suffer and die unnecessarily if response strategies are not based on what people will actually face when a disaster strikes
 - In 2005, Hurricane Katrina proved that prediction to be correct
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THE PUBLIC IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE

- Emergency planners need to learn *from* the public in order to protect the public
 - The public's knowledge is essential in dealing with many other issues, too
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THE PUBLIC IS AN UNDERUTILIZED RESOURCE

- Experts are expected to be experts
 - They – like everyone else – don't know what they don't know
 - Consequently, they don't recognize when they need the public's knowledge to compensate for what they don't know
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STRATEGY FOR BENEFITING FROM THE PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE

Sources:

- With the Public's Knowledge: A User's Guide to the Redefining Readiness Small Group Discussion Process (www.redefiningreadiness.net)
 - Engaging the Community in Decision Making: Case Studies Tracking Participation, Voice and Influence (www.pathwaystocollaboration.net)
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STRATEGIC QUESTIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

- When do we need the public's knowledge?
 - Whose knowledge needs to be tapped?
 - What essential knowledge do they have?
 - What enables their essential knowledge to be contributed and used?
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WHEN DO WE NEED THE PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE?

- When we are making assumptions about them
 - When we are stuck with what we know
 - *Remember:* we can't ascertain the value of the public's knowledge unless we find out what they know
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WHOSE KNOWLEDGE NEEDS TO BE TAPPED?

- People who are experiencing the particular problem we are addressing
 - People who will be affected by the plan, program, or policy we are developing
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WHAT ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE DO THEY HAVE?

- What they care about and know that no one else knows directly
 - Knowledge, gained from living their lives, which is as essential as academic and technical expertise in identifying, understanding, and addressing the issues they face
 - Knowledge that experts in the field lack and may not even realize is needed
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THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

- Many barriers inadvertently prevent the public's essential knowledge from being contributed and used
 - If we are aware of these barriers, each can be overcome
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WHAT ENABLES THE PUBLIC TO CONTRIBUTE THEIR KNOWLEDGE?

- A frame of reference that is meaningful to ordinary people
 - Supports that make participation feasible
 - An environment that values their ideas
 - Assistance in expressing clear and specific ideas
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WHAT ENABLES THE PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE TO BE USED?

- Accurate and complete recording of their ideas
 - Authentic analysis of their collective ideas
 - Products that they, as well as experts, can use as a basis for decision making and action
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A COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLIC

- Produce the knowledge base for protecting and improving health collaboratively with the public – by combining what the people we want to help know with what people trained in public health know
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ANTICIPATED BENEFITS

- More comprehensive and grounded knowledge base for protecting and improving health
 - Stronger capacity for effective action
 - Enhanced visibility of public health
 - Justified trust and confidence in public health
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FOR MORE INFORMATION

- www.redefiningreadiness.net
 - www.pathwaystocollaboration.net
 - RDL77@columbia.edu
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