

Engaging the Media

An open, public process is essential to broad participation and leads to a truly community-driven process. The media — newspapers, radio, television, newsletters, Internet — are especially useful tools for issuing broad invitations to participate in MAPP activities, keeping the community involved in the process, and sharing information gathered in the assessments. Briefings or press releases can be effective tools for using the media. In addition, interviews with the various community leaders engaged in the MAPP process demonstrate community consensus and broad ownership in the initiative. Open advocacy by such leaders may encourage other community members to become involved in the MAPP process.

To the extent possible, contact with the media about the MAPP process should be coordinated through a lead organization. Messages should be short, to the point and supported by visual information wherever practical. The use of scientific and statistical terminology is not helpful if community participation and input is a goal. Health departments are encouraged to be especially sensitive to the community's need for clear, understandable messages. County health department public information officers are skilled and experienced at working with the media. Involving them in the MAPP process is recommended.

Helpful Hints for Engaging the Media: If possible, solicit the assistance of a media-savvy individual, perhaps a public information officer or someone who works in public relations or the media. Use the media wisely — newspapers offer an excellent medium for showing photos or publishing vital findings, while television may be used to show brief footage of MAPP activities, and radio may be best for communicating simple, brief announcements. Craft your message so that it resonates with community residents and target populations. Messages that include individuals' needs and priorities are the most powerful way to appeal to residents and will most likely be of interest to the media. A well-crafted press release is the simplest way to gain support through the media. Be considerate of media timelines — become familiar with deadlines for the various media and let reporters know about potential stories in advance. Develop feature stories that address issues from a human interest angle. Identify why the information is relevant to the community (e.g., what is the local impact? Why should our community be interested?). Determine why the information is "news" (e.g., Why should the media use this information NOW?). Send each release to all kinds of media, including electronic billboards. Don't call reporters if a press release will suffice. Build relationships with reporters. Ask what kind of information they are interested in and provide it to them. Issue releases on every new program or finding. Even a small mention is worth it, and it will help to identify who is interested in what stories. Never give up. Getting the word out there is worth the frustration of pitching the story. Involve high-profile community leaders or local celebrities in disseminating the message.

Helpful Hints for Interviews: Anticipate the kinds of questions that are likely to be asked. Prepare responses and try to make points that support your position, even if no one asks. Make positive, important points and speak in the active voice. Be prepared to twist negative questions into something more positive. Respond in 20- to 30-second segments that can stand alone. Speak in short, complete, uncomplicated sentences. Use simple words and refrain from using public health jargon. Never speak "off the record." Once reporters know the information, they will seek out a source who will speak "on the record." Expect anything you say — even parts of what you say — to be used. Avoid "No Comment" responses. Say that you will get back to them or find someone else to answer the question. Avoid sarcasm. Comments taken out of context can be very damaging. Be polite to reporters and never lose your temper.