

Fact Sheet: Grassroots Movement Building

- **Grassroots movement building** has unique **benefits** for the public health field. The power of a well-run grassroots movement can overcome the dominance of money in politics, making it one of the only ways that advocates can achieve real progress in public health policy.
- A grassroots **public health movement** is an organized effort to address threats to the health and safety of the community, led by activated citizens and organizations that devote resources to movement building. As one grassroots advocate put it, “those who are directly impacted by an issue are... making change and taking leadership.”*
- Public health movements are usually built around a single issue that **energizes individuals** who join together in common cause.
- As illustrated by the case of tobacco control, grassroots movements can promote fundamental **social change** by educating the public about public health problems and solutions. Therefore, when laws are passed as the result of grassroots action, compliance and enforcement are easier because of public support.
- **Goals.** Grassroots goals must energize grassroots advocates. One of the most important jobs of a grassroots leader is listening to grassroots advocates and formulating practical goals that channel grassroots passion while appealing to others who don't (yet) have a strong opinion about your issue. Effective grassroots goals form achievable steps that lead naturally to the next victory.
- **Leadership.** Effective grassroots leaders need more than passion – they need experience and the skills to build and manage public health movements. These skills include network management, social media, and media advocacy. Movement leaders must earn the trust of grassroots advocates by listening and making informed strategic choices.
- **Capacity.** Building a grassroots movement takes hard work and patience, and this means that movements need the support of funders and other organizations that can increase their capacity. Specific needs include professional staff, website and other communications expertise, training, and technical assistance.
- A grassroots movement is different than a coalition or community organizing. **All** of them can contribute to progress in public health.
- **Preemption** has a negative impact on grassroots movement building. Preemption occurs when a higher level of government (federal or state) limits the authority of lower jurisdictions (state or local) to address a public health problem. One grassroots leader described preemption this way: “There's far less incentive for people to organize and act because they don't have an opportunity to take action at the local level.”*

*Grassroots Change/RWJF Key Informant Interviews 2010.

Pertschuk M, Hobart R, Paloma M, Larkin MA, and Balbach ED. Grassroots Movement Building and Preemption in the Campaign for Residential Fire Sprinklers. *American Journal of Public Health*: October 2013, Vol. 103 (10)1780-1787. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2013.301317; Frattaroli S. Grassroots Advocacy for Gun Violence Prevention: A Status Report on Mobilizing a Movement. *J Public Health Pol.* 2003;24(3/4):332-354; Institute of Medicine. *For the Public's Health: Revitalizing Law and Policy to Meet New Challenges*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2011; Nathanson CA. *Disease Prevention as Social Change: The State, Society, and Public Health in the United States, France, Great Britain, and Canada*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 2007; Pertschuk M, Pomeranz JL, Aoki JR, Larkin MA, Paloma M. Assessing the Impact of Federal and State Preemption in Public Health: A Framework for Decision Makers. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*. 2012; Preemption and Movement Building in Public Health, Key Informant Interviews 2010 (RWJF; Grassroots Change).