



Policy Implementation: Surveying the Landscape

The potential impact of local policy change on substance misuse is enormous. But not all policies are right for all communities—and not all communities are ready for policy. Multiple factors influence a community’s ability to plan and implement policy, including attitudes toward the problem to be addressed, readiness to act, and policies already in place. The success of any policy initiative will depend on the degree to which a proposed policy aligns with these factors.

The following questions can help you assess the role these factors may play in your community. The answers may be revealing. For example, you may discover that the time isn’t right to take on policy change—that other things need to happen first. Or that policy *is* the right move—just not the specific policy you had in mind.

- ✓ **What does substance misuse look like in your community?** Understanding the nature, extent, and impact of the problem you want your policy to address is important for several reasons. First, the more you know and understand about the problem in *your* community, the more likely you will be to select the right policy strategy. Second, the more relevant and specific the information you collect, the better prepared you will be to raise local awareness of the issue, motivate allies, and influence opponents.
- ✓ **What makes your community unique?** For example, is the population disproportionately young—or old? Are there many transients (characteristic of a college town or vacation destination)? The answers to these questions will help you both define your policy and the action steps needed to enact it. For example, if yours is a college town, you will need to consider the particular challenges of addressing substance use on campus and work with college officials to address those head-on. If you’re a tourist spot, you will need to engage the business community in any policy decisions.
- ✓ **What are your community’s norms around substance misuse?** Understanding community norms around substance use will help you gauge potential support for policy change. Public acceptance and support is necessary for several reasons. First, you will need both to get any policy passed. Second, you will need both to ensure that the policy is enforced. And finally, widespread support will increase the extent to which individuals voluntarily comply. This is critical, since it’s nearly impossible to enforce a policy with which people are unwilling to comply. In fact, enforcement is only effective when most



people comply willingly, since forcing everyone to do something they don't want to do is unfeasible.

- ✓ **Is your community ready to act?** Community readiness can be defined as the extent to which a community is *adequately prepared* to implement a prevention effort. It is a measure of a community's willingness and ability to address a particular issue. Whereas norms reflect *attitudes*, readiness reflects *potential for action*. So even in a community where pervasive norms mitigate against policy change, you may find a committed group of individuals willing to move your initiative forward.
- ✓ **Who are your potential allies—and opponents?** Successful policy change hinges on the support of key allies. Key allies are individuals willing to help move forward the policy development process and eventually, take ownership of it. At best, they are influential people, invested in seeing change happen and willing to demonstrate that support in highly visible ways. Every policy effort should involve a unique set of allies: the more specific, the better.
- ✓ **What policies already exist?** Knowing what policies are already on the books—and the degree to which they are supported and enforced—can help you determine whether new policy development is warranted. Remember that policy does not function well in a vacuum. In the absence of effective enforcement, public education, and related community-based services, the impact of any policy will be negligible.