

CASE STUDY

HEALTH JOURNALISM FELLOWSHIPS

USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL for COMMUNICATIONS and JOURNALISM

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES that FAST TRACK POLICY CHANGE



HIGHLIGHTS


Issue Childhood and adult obesity in West Virginia has reached epidemic proportions, and the state consistently ranks among the worst in every obesity-linked chronic disease. Annual associated health costs are projected to exceed \$20 billion by 2018.

Strategy Training, project support and peer exchange for journalists supports quality, in-depth reporting for a newspaper series titled “The Shape We’re In” and community outreach on the issue to key stakeholders and policymakers.

Who The Dennis A. Hunt Family, The California Endowment (TCE), California Healthcare Foundation, Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health.

How Much A Dennis A. Hunt Fund for Health Journalism individual reporting grant of \$7,000 for one year + a portion of ongoing USC Annenberg Health Journalism Fellowships program infrastructure, programming, mentoring and administrative funding from TCE.

Biggest Result Childhood obesity became an important issue for all stakeholders, and the West Virginia State School Board adopted a policy requiring an additional half hour of daily physical activity for every child.



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INTRODUCTION

The California Endowment, the state's largest health foundation, has a strategy aimed at reducing health disparities by combining deep sustained investment in communities with a focus on state policy change. A key idea behind the strategy is that grassroots concerns develop a strong policy agenda removing roadblocks to health and opportunity for Californians.

The California Endowment also believes in the power of quality journalism to engage communities, bring people together and start conversations about important health issues. Through The California Endowment Health Journalism Fellowships at the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, journalists are enabled to devote time and resources to the research, in-depth reporting of and outreach about the health issues that are important in their communities. In a competitive, cash-strapped news environment where beat reporters are rare, most news outlets cannot easily afford to cover complex stories (a.k.a., "enterprise stories") that require extensive research and effort.

Since 2005, the Fellowships initiative has trained and provided support for more than 600 journalists, their newsrooms and their communities. Through its National Health Journalism Fellowship, its California Health Journalism Fellowship and other programs focused on investigative, online and broadcast journalism, the initiative helps journalists develop a broad vision of health reporting and ensures the publication of innovative and ambitious reporting of projects on community health.

To commemorate his unexpected passing in 2007, family and friends established the Dennis A. Hunt Fund for Health Journalism, which is administered by the Fellowships. Hunt was a visionary leader at The Endowment who was instrumental in establishing the USC Fellowship program.

Each year, 20 National Health Fellows and Dennis A. Hunt Fellows are selected and awarded stipends ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000. Fellows and their editors sign a contract committing to produce a series for their communities on a health issue of their choosing. The reporter and editor travel to Los Angeles to participate in a five-day USC symposium where they are exposed to healthcare experts and field visits and mentored by past Fellows, emerging with ideas, sources and a broad vision of community health. The Fellowships, funded through The Endowment's multi-year infrastructure grant, plus other foundation and Hunt family support, needed to produce ambitious journalism. Ingredients for this unique model include: an intensive professional development opportunity, tools for community engagement, a powerful in-person and online support network (ReportingonHealth.org) for often-isolated journalists, and mentoring on projects. The USC Annenberg School's approach relies on a teaching model that advances journalism focused on impact and solutions, known as "solutions journalism."

As a Hunt Fund awardee in 2011, veteran journalist Kate Long received a \$7,000, one-year stipend to report on childhood obesity in West Virginia for the *Charleston Gazette*. In 2012, the *Gazette* began publishing her series, "The Shape We're In." Three years later, she continues to write on the issue and policymakers statewide are paying attention.

The story of The Health Journalism Fellowship resonates for all grantmakers who seek to elevate an important social issue that no one is talking about and create a sense of urgency around it.

POLICY WITH A CAPITAL “P” AND A SMALL “p”

IMPACTS

The response to Long’s series, “The Shape We’re In,” was immediate. In June 2012, less than five months after the first article ran, Long received a letter from Don Purdue, Chair of the Health and Human Resources Committee of the state legislature. “The articles were outstanding,” wrote Purdue, “... to the point, presented with fine clarity and [they] have generated a great deal of interest and talk among fellow legislators. In part because of the articles, the Joint Committee on Health has committed to studying these issues ... If there is any way to get copies of your articles for distribution as the study topics are presented to the Legislature, it would be greatly appreciated.” Similar notes poured in from senior leaders in every branch of government and from health care and education leaders.

On July 26, 2012, the *Gazette*’s front page featured a picture of the Joint Committee Hearing with copies of Long’s articles at the side of every lawmaker.

In 2014 SB 465, the “Move to Improve Act” was introduced in the West Virginia House. The legislation called for elementary school students to participate in 30 minutes of physical education three times per week. SB 465 passed the Senate in spring, but stalled in the House—blocked by one legislator. An op-ed piece in the *Gazette* cited “The Shape We’re In” series as seminal to generating the political and public will for the legislation.

As a result of the series, The American Diabetes Association (which had closed its branch office in West Virginia in 2009 due to funding cutbacks) returned to the state in 2013. As a result, West Virginians regained a powerful force for education and access to resources.

Although the state legislation stalled, educational policies have changed. The West Virginia State Board of Education adopted a policy requiring an additional half hour of daily physical activity for every child.

A new funder, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation is now supporting an ongoing effort to highlight best practices in obesity prevention through the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families

Coalition, which asked reporter Kate Long to lead the effort. This has resulted in TryThisWV.com, a website containing solutions and actions West Virginians can take to decrease their risk. The site includes content provided by Long and community members. She continues her work on the issue with speaking engagements and community training sessions on how to use this valuable new online resource.

Long is also now paying it forward. She continues to be active in the USC Health Journalism Fellowship program as a Senior Fellow and mentor. Long also teaches community engagement techniques at Fellowship seminars. Most former Fellows also continue to be involved in the Fellowships’ network. In 2012, Long provided valuable mentoring to Fellow Cindy Uken in the pursuit of her series on suicide in Montana for the *Billings Gazette*. The *New York Times* subsequently reported on the issues highlighted by Uken. Uken and her editor followed the lead of Kate Long and sent the first three installments of her series to all lawmakers and the governor. And as a result, several pieces of legislation were introduced in the Montana state legislature. Ultimately, House Bill 583 was passed and signed into law by Governor Steve Bullock, who called Uken to thank her as he signed the bill. The new law created the first Montana Suicide Review Team.

HOW IT HAPPENED

The “Shape We’re In” series employed an integrated approach to quality journalism and stakeholder outreach.

Financial support and moral support

Long was working for the *Charleston Gazette*, where reporting on West Virginia’s obesity epidemic was not a high priority. Like most newspapers, the *Gazette* was in layoff mode. Long realized she could maintain her employment and cultivate what the *Gazette*’s founder, W.E. “Ned” Chilton, historically referred to as “sustained outrage.” This time, the outrage wouldn’t be about a corrupt politician or a bloated budget, but over the state of chronic disease in West Virginia. Long soon found out that the support for the project from USC Annenberg’s Health Journalism Fellowships went beyond financial to the emotional. As one recent Fellow described it, “It wasn’t just exposure to experts ... it was exposure to people just like me. The

experience at USC provided camaraderie ... it was a wonderful support system to turn to when the project seemed so overwhelming and daunting.”

A branded series

Long worked closely with the *Gazette*'s graphic designers and editors to “brand” the series with its own logo, compelling graphics and imagery that reinforced key points of the stories. Editors gave every story prominent front page positioning. In total, the series consisted of 68 feature articles and nine multi-media packages. It appeared almost every two weeks in the paper and online. Long also created a story arc for the year, beginning with the effects on children and emphasizing the urgency of “the public health emergency.” Long explains, “We paid a great deal of attention to the headlines and the cutline ... so that the main points of the story were also conveyed graphically.” Each of the articles carried the attribution line at the bottom, “This article was written with the help of the Dennis A. Hunt Fund for Health Journalism administered by The California Endowment Health Journalism Fellowships, at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.”

Reframing the issue

Long recognized that the public largely regarded obesity as an appearance issue, not a medical condition that was leading West Virginia’s children to an early death. She found stakeholders were not connecting the dots between obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic conditions. Long reframed the issue as a medical condition — but not as an abstraction. She grounded the stories in medical risk and emphasized the medical consequences of excess weight as told through the tragedy and triumph of individuals.

Proactive outreach on parallel paths

In addition to writing the series, Long became a one-woman outreach machine to various stakeholder groups and lawmakers. Although not all journalists are comfortable with community outreach, Long was unabashed about her goals for her Fellowship project. “I wanted to get people stirred up,” she explains. “And I absolutely intended to [influence] the state legislature ... I know a lot of the state legislators. The first step was to make it part of the state conversation and get it on the radar.” Long emphasized outreach to legislators from the very beginning. Once a piece was written, she emailed it directly to lawmakers and a long list of partner organizations, from the medical association to school leaders. In turn, these organizations shared the articles with their constituencies and created a ripple effect into the community.

Breaking down the silos

Letters and emails poured in from government agencies, nonprofit and trade organizations, praising the series and citing real impact on their work. As the leader of the West Virginia University Extension Service describes, “When Kate and I first met ... she expressed that she would like to help break down the silos that exist between counties, government agencies, health care, schools, etc ... and in just a few short months, I can attest that the silos were beginning to fall.”

Editor and outlet buy-in

As part of the Fellowship process, editors are engaged and committed from the very beginning. This is essential to creating a supportive working environment for the Fellows. In the case of the *Gazette*, the paper supported her for another year after her Fellowship officially ended. Executive Editor of the *Gazette*, Robert J. Byers, explains, “It was part civic journalism, part community journalism. And we realized the impact it had and that we needed to keep it going.” The *Gazette* also provided resources (graphic artist/work time) to create a new website to house all the articles, a teaching curriculum and other resources.

Peer support network

The Fellowship also provides journalists with a powerful and supportive network of fellow journalists who can empathize with the challenges associated with in-depth reporting. Cindy Uken explains, “The experience at USC gave me a built-in camaraderie. We networked. We were all on Facebook. It was a wonderful support system ... when it seemed overwhelming and daunting, it was great to have other people to turn to.”

What is necessary, explains Long, “is that you are persistent. That’s what sustained outrage is. For a public health crisis it is not enough to report on it one time, two times or five times. You have to change the conversation by presenting accurate information from many angles ... again, and again and again.”

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ Training and convening journalists around social issues can pay off, given their unique ability to frame issues in ways that are simultaneously accessible to the public and compelling to lawmakers. Editorial buy-in is key.
- ▶ An in-depth enterprise series of articles, combined with community outreach, expands audience reach, builds momentum and breaks down silos among stakeholder groups.
- ▶ Frequency and consistency of reporting sustains top-of-mind awareness for the issue and creates the public and political will for action.
- ▶ Providing solutions, not just problem definition, gives readers hope and engages stakeholders in productive dialogue.
- ▶ Quality reporting that fills a community need can be self-sustaining — integrated into the outlet’s business operations and/or extended through local philanthropic efforts.



10 Elements of Success

Among the Fast Track case studies, we've identified the following 10 insights. The most critical elements of success for each case appear as symbols throughout the series.



1 SOLUTIONS

The majority of these initiatives contained messages not just about the problem, but about a range of potential solutions. The net effect is to give the public hope and give policymakers a call to action. This approach also speaks directly to the nexus of the nature of the Internet and journalism: to both ask questions and answer them.



2 POLICYMAKERS

Identifying policymakers explicitly as a target audience and devoting appropriate resources to outreach is key. Whenever possible, explicitly making it a bi-partisan effort can be very effective.



3 AGILITY

While a communications strategy is important, so is building in flexibility. The ability to respond quickly with resources to a changing landscape is critical to overcoming unforeseen challenges and leveraging unexpected opportunities. Often these initiatives can be a bit messy mid-stream; flexibility and agility makes navigation easier.



4 REPETITION

Continuity of coverage has a multiplier effect on awareness-building. Journalistic series and paid-advertising campaigns keep issues top-of-mind during delays in the legislative process.



5 HUMANITY

Engaging community voices can be a powerful way to give an issue a human face. Emphasizing personal impact stories can also support journalistic efforts, assist with multi-media content, engage the constituents of lawmakers and provide testimonials for solutions.



6 PAID ADVERTISING

Having the ability to control the content and timing of messages through paid advertising can create awareness during key milestones. The ability to customize messages geographically or by target audience can also accelerate the speed of social change.



7 FOUNDATION BRANDING

Putting a foundation's name and "brand" on media or communications efforts lends credibility and gravitas to an issue, especially in smaller markets or rural areas. Stakeholders are more likely to take another look at an issue if it has become the priority of a philanthropic institution.



8 MEDIA START-UPS

Establishing digital outlets for in-depth coverage about an issue can be a cost-effective and efficient way of designating a "space" for the issue to live in. At their best, these sites also become media tools for expanded and sustained coverage over time.



9 PARTNER. PARTNER. PARTNER.

Whether it is funder partnerships or media partnerships, collaborative and in-kind efforts result in impact that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.



10 INTEGRATION FROM THE OUTSET

The combination of media, community and policymaker engagement from the beginning of a strategic communications effort is key to success. The catalytic effect of coordinating and integrating these strategies far outweighs any one as a siloed or solo effort.