

CASE STUDY

REPORTING ON HEALTH COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES that FAST TRACK POLICY CHANGE



HIGHLIGHTS

Issue Valley fever, a disease caused by inhaling fungal spores found in the soil, infects more than 150,000 people each year, primarily in rural agricultural communities. Valley fever kills more people annually than hantavirus, whooping cough and salmonella poisoning combined, but there has been little interest in new treatments or a cure.

Strategy Leverage the combined power of individual newsrooms by building a community media collaborative—integrated with community and policymaker outreach.

Who The California Endowment.

How Much \$85,000 for project editor, project management, community engagement editor and valley fever blogging over 18 months, \$30,000 for microsite development, plus additional multi-year, in-house investment in journalism training and journalism networking and in-house investment for editorial leadership and content coordination.

Biggest Result The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) committed to dedicate millions in funding to launch a major new study on treatment protocols.

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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 14 disadvantaged 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 and outreach for the health issues that are important in their communities. In a competitive, cash-strapped news environment where reporters rarely can focus on just one topic or "beat," 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. The initiative helps journalists develop a broad vision of health reporting and ensures the publication of innovative reporting projects on community health.

Michelle Levander, founding director of the Fellowships and an award-winning journalist, realized that the network of reporters and editors in the program represented a valuable resource that could be leveraged to extend the impact and influence of journalism projects beyond that of any single newsroom or community.

In 2012, she approached a group of former Fellows and their editors in California's Central Valley to encourage a cooperative project on an overlooked community health issue that no one outlet could easily tackle. She received an enthusiastic response and brought together seven different newspaper and radio outlets under the banner of the "Reporting on Health Collaborative." They included *The Bakersfield Californian*, the *Merced Sun-Star*, *Radio Bilingue* in Fresno, *The Record* in Stockton, *Valley Public Radio* in Fresno and Bakersfield, *Vida en el Valle* in Fresno and the *Voice of OC* in Orange County.

After a series of brainstorming sessions, the group selected the topic of valley fever for a joint project. The discussions sparked the groundbreaking bilingual series "Just One Breath (Solo Un Respiro)," which ultimately included more than 80 stories and blog posts. Journalists had reported over the years on the disease, but no one had systematically investigated all the factors behind official neglect and inaction.

Going from idea to a fully-developed 18-month project, Levander ultimately devoted \$115,000 drawing from the grant's "Innovation Fund" (a flexible pool of funds dedicated to innovative practices) to the Reporting on Health Collaborative and the "Just One Breath" series. With encouragement to the Endowment, funds were used to provide a project editor, an outreach coordinator and visionary coordinating leadership. Notably, no direct stipends were provided to journalists or media outlets.

The story of The Reporting on Health Collaborative resonates for all grantmakers who seek to end a culture of complacency on a neglected issue that has significant human and taxpayer costs by capturing the attention and resources of policymakers, government agencies, academics and affected communities.

POLITICAL CHAMPIONS, PUBLIC AGENCY RESOURCES AND A CRITICAL MASS OF NATIONAL PRESS COVERAGE

IMPACTS

Less than a month after the publication of the first stories in the series in September 2012, California State Senator Michael Rubio (D-Shafter) held a town meeting in Bakersfield on valley fever—bringing together doctors, public health officials, researchers and the public. Rubio began the meeting by thanking the Collaborative, "... for its great reporting on this particular subject." "I felt it was long overdue," Rubio continued, "to bring together the top brass of public health experts and see what we can do to roll our sleeves up and take away a few action items ... so we can go back to Sacramento and move the ball forward on this very important subject."

As a result, three state senators formed a bi-partisan "Valley Fever Select Committee" poised to introduce a raft of legislation focused on research dollars and prevention.

Policymaking hit a roadblock, however, when in February of 2013, valley fever lost its political champion: Rubio retired from office. The series continued, however, and a steady drumbeat of coverage kept the issue in the public eye and in front of lawmakers. As their understanding deepened, reporters took investigative angles, reporting on vulnerable populations in state prisons and documenting the financial and human costs. Months later, a federal receiver ordered the state to stop sending prisoners from those vulnerable populations to two Central California state prisons.

In spring of 2013, the CDC's research confirmed one of the Collaborative's key findings: that valley fever had risen to alarming levels during the past decade (cases rose more than eight-fold in five western states from 1998 to 2011). Ongoing conversations with the CDC led to unprecedented content sharing of Collaborative information on the federal agency's website.

Shortly thereafter, the valley fever story went national. As a result of outreach efforts by the Collaborative, the *NPR Global Newsdesk* picked up the story, running a major feature by one of the Collaborative's reporters. *PBS NewsHour*, *The New York Times*, the *BBC* and *The New Yorker* followed.

Less than one month after *The New York Times* story, and less than one year from the date of the first "Just One Breath" story, House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-California) and Rep. David Schweikert (R-Arizona) formed a Congressional task force to study the problem. McCarthy, whose home base is in Bakersfield, a valley fever hot spot, sent copies of the "Just One Breath" series to the CDC and demanded answers. McCarthy then convened a two-day valley fever symposium led by the top leadership from the CDC and National Institutes of Health. There the two agency chiefs made a public commitment to dedicate millions in funding to a randomized clinical trial of treatment approaches. According to McCarthy's chief of staff, McCarthy has said that the series "... gave him the ammunition to pursue the issue."

Educational efforts about valley fever expanded beyond California, In November 2013, Arizona governor Jan Brewer proclaimed "Valley Fever Awareness Week." In March 2014, a new documentary film on the topic, *Deadly Dust: Valley Fever in the West* debuted on PBS.

Recently published CDC educational materials on valley fever feature a familiar phrase: the series title, "Just One Breath," and a quote on the cover, "Along with the rise in infection rates, suffering and deaths, costs are rising, too. And we are all paying for that. *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 26, 2012."

HOW IT HAPPENED

The Reporting on Health Collaborative created a series of over 80 stories and blog posts for the "Just One Breath (Solo Un Respiro)" series. The project frequently and systematically explored the health effects of the devastating disease; its frequent misdiagnosis; harmful side effects from common treatments; the prevalence and causes, government inaction and the costs to communities and families. The series provides a model for others interested in supporting local media collaboratives — where together reporters, editors and outlets can accomplish far more than they could individually.

Strong leadership and trust

To guide the Reporting on Health Collaborative, Levander brought in veteran investigative journalist, William Heisel, as project editor. A two-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, Heisel encouraged collaboration among the normally competitive journalists. Heisel's editorial hand also proved invaluable in creating a strong and consistent voice for the series in pieces where two and three reporter bylines from different outlets were the norm. Coordinating with Spanish-language media partners was also key. Additionally, Levander credits the Collaborative's success to the fact that all the journalists involved (and their editors) had previously participated in Fellowships. As she describes it, their involvement with the program created "deep ties and a great reservoir of trust and good will" that created buy-in.

Solutions journalism

Heisel observes what he believes to be a key factor in the series' success: solutions. "Journalists have a knack for pointing out problems," Heisel writes in his blog for ReportingonHealth.org. "They rarely explain how to fix problems. The message to readers is the world is a mess. You figure out how to make it better ... The number of stories I have written where I pointed out something was wrong compared to the number of stories where I suggested how to do something right would be about 5 to 1."

"Just One Breath" benefited from a strategic focus from the top, enthusiastic reporters and generous editors, plus sufficient time for reporters to speak with enough sources and read through enough research to share solutions and realistic timeframes. One article outlined such specific suggestions as "Raise enough money to finish the work of creating a vaccine, the silver bullet in the fight against valley fever, by 2022."

A branded series

All articles in the series were branded with the credit line, "The Collaborative is an Initiative of The California Endowment Health Journalism Fellowships at USC's Annenberg School For Communication and Journalism." More than just transparency, the line brought much needed clout to the topic. The fact that a prestigious foundation and a university were interested in valley fever made thought leaders,

policymakers and the national media take notice. The Collaborative created a microsite where the stories could live and be made accessible to the Fellowship's network of 600 other journalists. Just as importantly, the stories ran simultaneously in the seven news outlets, accompanied by strong editorials.

Proactive outreach on parallel paths

On a parallel track with the journalistic series, the Collaborative provided the group with a dedicated community outreach coordinator whose job it was to strategically and proactively share the series with stakeholder organizations and legislators. Levander asked the community outreach coordinator to develop a list of health organizations, agricultural organizations, policymakers and legislators who had a stake in the matter, along with a list of what each organization could do to help. Messages and outreach were targeted by audience. For legislators, a regular newsletter was developed. The goal was to raise awareness and spark conversations, not advocacy. Kellie Schmidt, the first community outreach coordinator for the Collaborative, recalls, "We had our reporters review the newsletter to make sure that we weren't pushing the agenda too much."

The community outreach coordinator also conducted a social media campaign, providing customized sample tweets and links to interested stakeholder groups. Social media outreach strategies both expanded the audience reach beyond the media outlets and increased the frequency of exposure to the issue.

Community storytellers

The outreach coordinator also captured community voices through email and voicemail hotlines. These calls became part of an ongoing set of stories called "The Faces of Valley Fever." Through these channels, victims of the disease and their families could share their stories with a broader audience—humanizing the statistical story about the disease's rising toll. A storybank for the Collaborative and other journalists was also created. Schmidt remembers, "The people who contacted us often had stories that were more compelling than the ones we were reporting." The community storytellers were interviewed and photographed. Their stories were posted online and published in the outlets of Collaborative partners.

Critical mass in the national media

Between the Collaborative's seven print and broadcast partners, the series reached a readership of over one million people. Collaborative leadership also reached out to national media with the story and the offer to share resources. It was picked up nationally and internationally in print, online and broadcast outlets. And although the series officially ended in December 2012, the issue is still being covered by Collaborative members who continue to hold official responders accountable for their actions.

Kirt Emory, Kern County Health Assessment and Epidemiology program manager describes the role of the Collaborative as "critical" in garnering national attention. "Papers were published regarding medical studies and by the Valley Fever Center for Excellence, but there was no real breakthrough until the Collaborative started doing the "Just One Breath" series."

As The Rockefeller Foundation noted in its report, *Digital Reporting for Social Impact*, "While there have never been more ways to reach audiences, it has also never been more difficult to *really* reach them. The Collaborative made that happen with a multi-faceted approach."

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ Foundations can legitimately play a role in spurring news coverage of neglected but vital areas of public policy.
- ▶ Competitive journalists can effectively collaborate and pool resources for in-depth series on complex issues; diverse skillsets and audiences create a whole greater than the sum of its parts.
- ▶ Community outreach, in parallel with story placement, builds awareness and momentum for the issue.
- ▶ Sustained outreach and continuity over time helped keep the issues top-of-mind among key stakeholders despite political leadership changes and legislative setbacks.
- ▶ Community storytelling supports journalists, engages the constituencies of policymakers and gives voice to at-risk communities.
- ▶ Issue topics that evolve organically from within the community get traction, buy-in, and resonate with journalists, local policymakers and readers.



Photo: Henry A. Barrios, The Californian



Photo: Daniel Casarez, Vide en el Valle

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.