

M22

Learning Policy Advocacy While Engaging in Policy Advocacy: Legislative and Academic Calendars Don't Always Match

Maine, like many states, recently has experienced revenue shortfalls in its state budget. The governor and state legislators only have employed budget cuts to offset these shortfalls. Creation of new revenues or use of budget stabilization funds are not viewed as viable options. The governor's FY 2009 supplemental budget proposed more cuts to address a \$190,000,000.00 revenue deficit. Most of the cuts were slated for Maine's Department of Health and Human Services (MeDHHS) budget. These cuts were in addition to \$100,000,000.00 MeDHHS lost from its community mental health budget for FY 2008. Once again, those who receive mental health, foster care, domestic violence and sexual assault services were targeted to bear the brunt of the budget cuts.

In an effort to prevent further community mental health budget cuts, which would affect approximately 30,000 Mainers, 45 students enrolled in three sections of a graduate Social Welfare Policy and Programs II (SWPP II) course engaged in a semester of policy advocacy outside of the academic setting. These students also worked to promote social justice and learn policy advocacy. We quickly learned the legislative calendar would not wait for us to learn about policy advocacy before we began our advocacy. We advocated as we learned and learned as we advocated. We first formed five distinct task groups (see Appendix 1) to raise executive and legislative stakeholders' awareness of the problems created by the cuts to the FY 2007 and FY 2008 community mental health budgets and the potential problems of the proposed FY 2009 supplemental budget cuts and to gather data from clients, agencies and community members.

We used traditional and creative advocacy strategies and tactics to send our message to target audiences and to engage various constituencies. We presented oral testimony to legislative committees, which represented the views of Maine citizens unable to travel to the legislative

hearings. We used quantitative data from our research to show the financial impact of cutting community mental health budgets. Multiple forms of communication, including YouTube, were used to advocate with and for our various constituencies. We generated several budget and revenue generation alternatives and presented them to Maine's policymakers. Furthermore, we organized two community forums to generate alternatives to budget cuts and to inform the public about the budget process.

In April 2008, the supplemental budget passed. While we did not reach our advocacy goal, our efforts, in collaboration with others, succeeded in restoring \$27,000,000.00 in mental health funding. We enhanced the governor's staff and legislators' knowledge about the negative effects of community mental health budget cuts. We helped amplify the voices of Maine's most vulnerable. Our efforts also led our school to agree to integrate advocacy practice as a theme in other courses.

We learned it is important to have a defined advocacy strategy, but to remain flexible. We learned we needed to build diverse coalitions. We learned that workable alternatives, sound data and passionate persuasion are all critical aspects of advocacy. Finally, we learned the power of waking up each morning knowing that we are a part of the only profession that states in its Code of Ethics, that it is not only our responsibility to help individuals, but to change the world simultaneously.

Table 1: Outline of task groups

Task Groups	Purpose	Tasks
1. Governor's Office	Inform the Governor and his Staff of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) the impact of the budget cuts on the lives of people and communities 2) 2 alternatives to the purposed budget cuts 	<p>The task group met with the Governor's staff and Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services</p> <p>Task members spoke with the Governor about cuts at a local Chamber of Commerce event</p>
2. Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs (JSCAFA)	Inform the JSCAFA of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) the importance of community mental health services in Maine 2) the problems created for Maine's citizens by previous cuts to community mental health services and 3) to convince the Committee to vote to prevent further cuts in the community mental health budget by providing alternative revenue generating solutions 	<p>Provided 8 testimonies at JSCAFA public Hearings</p> <p>Published 1 Op-Ed in Maine's largest newspaper: http://pressherald.mainetoday.com/story.php?id=170530&ac=PHedi</p> <p>A task group member presented at the Franklin Community Health Network Community Forum on cost shifting to the greater community. (Resulted in 3 separate publications in local newspapers)</p> <p>A task group member presented to local televised media <i>Our Town</i> regarding cost shifting to schools due to cuts to the mental health budget</p> <p>Task group members designed and disturbed phone scripts to agencies and clients to be used in a telephone campaign to influence the Governor and the legislators.</p> <p>Task group members developed a letter campaign to engage the greater community to become more involved with the Governor and state representatives in regards to the proposed cuts.</p> <p>Task group members networked with</p>

		the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill to participate in a community event.
3. Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services	<p>Inform the JSCHHS of the need :</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) to raise the Health and Human Services Committees awareness about the importance of community mental health in Maine 2) to raise the Committee's awareness of the problems created for Maine citizens by cuts to community mental health 3) to convince the Committee to vote to restore funding for community mental health to FY 2006 levels 4) to convince the Committee to vote to prevent further cuts in the community mental health budget 	<p>Task group members organized a Roundtable Discussion on alternatives to the budget cuts. The Roundtable panel consisted of mental health professionals, policy think tank representatives , and users of services.</p> <p>Published 2 Op-eds in local newspapers</p> <p>Task group members attended JSCHHS work sessions and presented committee with alternatives to budget cuts.</p> <p>Task group members worked with clients, multiple agency staff and the greater community to brainstorm alternatives to the budget cuts.</p> <p>Task group members networked with Maine social service agencies to educate the greater public about the impact of the budget cuts.</p>
4. Organizational Impact and Action: Southern Maine Behavioral Health Collaboration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) to discover the extent of budget cuts the agencies have sustained in mental health funding during the past five years 2) to discover the impact of the cuts on the clients and their families and communities 3) to discover the approaches these agencies have taken or are taking to 	<p>A DVD was created of a homebound mental health client's personal testimony regarding how the proposed budget cuts would affect her. This was distributed to all committee members during a work session using the YouTube site.</p> <p>A student was interviewed by WGME news channel 13. She spoke about students' efforts against the budget cuts.</p> <p>Task group members engaged in advocating efforts with six large social</p>

	<p>4) address budget cuts to analyze and synthesize the data and to prepare appropriate packets to support the efforts of Task Groups 1-3</p>	<p>service agencies and a lobbyist firm, Moose Ridge Associates.</p> <p>Submitted 2 Op-Eds regarding the effects the budget cuts would have on the community and clients.</p> <p>Task group members worked with one of the big six agencies to gather narratives concerning the effects the budget cuts would have on clients. This information was later used in community forums and Op-Eds in local newspapers.</p> <p>Task group members created a web page that future students may access as a communication tool to post their advocacy efforts.</p> <p>Task group members created a power point presentation featuring quotes supplied by clients and mental health agencies to be shown during a Community Forum.</p> <p>Task group members agreed to monitor and supply all data, testimonies, opinion pieces, etc, for a newly created state wide web page created by the Franklin County Community Health Network.</p>
<p>5. Organizational Impact and Action: Community Mental Health Agencies</p>	<p>1) to discover the extent of budget cuts the agencies have sustained in mental health funding during the past five years</p> <p>2) to discover the impact of the cuts on the agencies and their families and communities</p> <p>3) to discover the</p>	<p>Task group members conducted data analysis of information provided by community agencies to construct community and media packets for distribution during community forums and legislative hearings.</p> <p>Task group members networked with the Maine Association of Mental Health Services to get as many State Mental Health organizations involved in the advocacy collaboration as</p>

	approaches these agencies have taken or are taking to address budget cuts 4) to analyze and synthesize the data and to prepare appropriate packets to support the efforts of Task Groups 1-3	possible.
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