

Be a Champion for Change in your Community

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

It’s easy to feel like there is nothing ordinary people can do to make a difference to the challenges facing rural women and the problems in our health system, but this kit was put together **to help you make a real difference** to the health of rural women.

This kit will help you become a **champion for change**.

A champion for change needs

- Passion
- A clear message to communicate
- People who share your concern
- People to hear your message who can do something about it.

You have everything it takes to be a champion for change. As a woman living rurally or at a distance from health services, you care deeply about rural women’s health. The challenge is to find ways to get your message to the right people – the people who can actually do something to make change happen.

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

So, how to get the message to the right place?

- Be clear about what the message is.
- What back-up information will you need?
- Talk to your friends. You never know who can carry these messages forward. The more of us who get involved, the more difference we can make.
- Figure out who can make the difference you’re looking for. Find out who has the power to make the change you want.



- What will help that decision-maker pay attention?
 - Face-to-face meetings are often most effective in small communities because they build relationships.
 - Media opportunities and public events make people aware of issues. They also influence people who care about public opinion.
 - Background notes (like the handouts in this kit) help decision-makers learn new information about the issue.
 - A letter writing campaign (or a campaign by telephone or e-mail) is most effective when many people participate.
 - Many decision-makers have advisors that they trust. Consider talking to the people that your decision-maker listens to.
 - What does the decision-maker care about? When you find ways to connect your interest with theirs, they are more likely to get involved. Find out where s/he is from, what s/he is responsible for, what s/he is excited about, what s/he has stood for in the past and what is currently in the news.
 - Contact that person. Sometimes it takes a number of calls until you reach the person you need to talk to. Don't give up. Be ready to ask clearly for what you want.
 - Bring others along. There is strength in numbers.
 - Find ways to contact the decision-maker again.
 - Write a follow-up thank you letter.
- Get back in touch whenever you get new information.
- Look for chances to connect with the decision-maker in other ways – on the street, at your place of work or theirs, at public events, etc.
- Use every opportunity to talk about your message. You never know who can make a difference

RESOURCES

These are other similar kits available for community use. They also have valuable information about how to advocate for change.

Advocacy on the Agenda: Preparing Volunteer Boards for Public Policy Participation

A user-friendly manual available at www.volunteer.ca or by calling Volunteer Canada at 1-800-670-0401.

Good Policy, Good Health: An Information and Action Kit for Women in Coastal Communities

A kit with tips and tools to help women's groups lobby for health policy changes, available from Nova Scotia Women's FishNet, 2099 Gottingen Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3K 3B2, 902-425-7778.



Changing Policy: Having a Say in Health Decisions

WHAT IS POLICY?

Governments, organizations and businesses create policies to help them do their work in a consistent and organized way. Policies are rules and steps to define what is to be done and how, and who it is for. Policies can be formally agreed upon and written down. Or they may be informal. There should be well-thought-out reasons for establishing a policy. Policies should be designed so that the work done by the organization meets the goals of that organization.

Policies affect our lives every day. Stores have return policies. Work places have policies about sick days. Schools have policies about how they expect students to behave.

WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?

The policies that governments make are called “public policies.” Public policies should reflect the values of the public, and they should be administered in a way that meets public goals.

WHO MAKES PUBLIC POLICY?

Good public policy reflects the values and experiences of the people it affects. Ideally, public policies are developed with the cooperation of many people. The need for new policies or policy changes can be brought to light by members of the public, the media, by politicians, or by civil servants. Government policies are drafted, revised and approved by government employees and then modified or approved by politicians, based on their understanding of the information (research) they have. New changes to policies go through a similar series of steps. Organizations (and governments) should evaluate their policies to see if they are working the way that they were planned. Comments from community and citizens are essential to ensure good policies are continued and that changes are made where they are needed.

WHAT IS HEALTH POLICY?

Health policies can range from how much money will be spent on treatments, facilities, and programs, to which health care workers will be trained and licensed, where their services will be located, and who gets the services. Many of the policies that affect health are not actually health policies – decisions relating to jobs, childcare and transportation can also affect our health.

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WHAT CAN ORDINARY PEOPLE DO TO CHANGE HEALTH POLICY?

Influencing policies is not an easy process. Making the links between a problem and the policies causing the problem takes practice, and there is not always an obvious connection between the advice given and the policy results we see. But we should never underestimate the power of the voices of individual people - or even one person – to influence change. A major Ontario highway was re-routed as a result of one concerned woman standing out on her lawn with a cardboard sign. Policies will only change when people who are affected by them take action to change them.

WHAT CAN AN ORDINARY PERSON DO?

- Get involved. You will never be heard if you don't speak up. Women make up more than half the population of Canada and are the majority of health care providers and users. What we have to say needs to be heard.
- Your task is to persuade decision-makers to see the implications of their decisions from the perspective of rural women. Stick to what you know. Tell decision-makers what is and what is not working for you.
- Don't do it alone - find other people and groups who share similar interests and work together for change.



Changing Research: Making Information Useful

When we look for the lowest grocery prices or interview babysitters, we are doing research. Making good decisions requires the right information. We need up-to-date, accurate information to make an effective case for change in rural health policy and programs.

THERE IS MUCH TO LEARN ABOUT RURAL WOMEN'S HEALTH

Many past health studies have only looked at men and assumed that the findings applied to everyone. Likewise, many health studies have been based in cities, using methods that haven't included rural populations effectively. Much of the necessary information on good health for rural women has not yet been gathered. More research on rural women's health in Canada is clearly needed.

HOW DOES RESEARCH INFLUENCE POLICY?

New information helps raise the profile of an issue with the public and politicians. Health planners and policy makers are interested in "evidence-based decision making." Research offers evidence that they are looking for. Useful information can take many forms, including needs assessments, program evaluations, community profiles, health utilization studies or case studies.

WHO DOES RESEARCH?

Universities and research councils are not the only places doing research. Governments, professional associations, health planning bodies and community-based coalitions also do research.

WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH MAKES A CASE FOR CHANGE?

While intuition and individual stories have an important influence on political decision-makers, they also need other sources of information. Surveys and other kinds of research help make sure that decisions are not just based on a single story heard on the way to a meeting. Good research should provide balance and perspective to policy decisions.

This kit is based on a study which consulted with rural women so they could contribute their knowledge to suggest effective policies, programs and research agendas for rural women's health. It offers an example for future research, showing the value of:

- Combining academic and community-based research

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**WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH
MAKES A CASE FOR CHANGE?**

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- Producing information that is relevant, useful and meant for change
- Involving the women most directly aware of and affected by the information, in designing the study, carrying it out, providing the information, as well as sharing the results.
- Generating the “qualitative data” — stories and details that deepen our understanding of an issue.

The kind of research in this report can be brought together with statistics and numbers (quantitative data). Numbers are needed to determine how many people are affected by an issue, how much it costs to do things right now, how much it will cost to do things differently, and how many people or communities will benefit. Decision-makers need all this information – the stories and the numbers - before they can go ahead with legislative or program changes.

The work in this report is important to define and raise the important issues, and since there were a large number of women from many different backgrounds the recommendations in this report are worth hearing and acting upon.

**HOW CAN ORDINARY PEOPLE
BE INVOLVED IN RESEARCH?**

- Community representatives and researchers can talk to decision-makers about what research they would find useful.
- We can influence what kind of research gets supported by contacting research funders such as the Canadian Institutes for Health Research or researchers themselves to remind them of the importance of rural women’s health issues.
- We can do research ourselves, by linking with community-based and academic organizations involved in research on rural women’s health issues.

RESOURCES

<www.cewh-cesf.ca>

Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health, 1-888-818-9172

Easy links to the various regional Centres of Excellence, as well as to the Canadian Women’s Health Network. Lots of material on community-based research on rural women’s health in Canada

<<http://crhrs-scrsr.usask.ca>>

Canadian Rural Health Research Society, 306-966-7888



RESOURCES

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<www.canadiansocialresearch.net>

Numerous links to Canadian social research sites, including ones on poverty and gender, as well as to media and government sites

<www.parnet.org>

A well-established internet-based network on participatory action research

<<http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/research.htm>>

A good list of action research websites and organizations

Community-based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices (E-book from Wiley Canada) Kerry J. Strand et. al. 2003.

Available at:

<www.wiley.ca/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-078797126X.html>

Doing Community-Based Research: A Reader (2001) – available for CDN \$18.50 from The Loka Institute, PO Box 355, Amherst, MA 01004
<www.loka.org>

The Ontario Rural Woman Abuse Study, sponsored by Justice Canada and Health Canada.

An example of action research on rural women's health in Canada. A report analyzing the community-based research approach, entitled "Women Speak: The Value of Community-Based Research on Woman Abuse" is also available at <<http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/rs/rep/rr00-14a-e.html>>

Final Report from the National Study on Rural, Remote and Northern Women's Health

Refer to the section on research priorities for more details

Available at Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, 56 The Promenade, Winnipeg, R3B 3H9. Tel: (204) 982-6630, email: pwhce@uwinnipeg.ca, website: <www.pwhce.ca>.

