

Road safety and public health: Partnering for advocacy

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Abstract

While road safety has traditionally been viewed as the responsibility of the transport and police sectors, the health sector has an important role to play in road traffic injury prevention through: policy development, advocacy, research, injury surveillance, services, prevention and control, and evaluation. In helping to achieve a goal of strengthening the links between public health and road safety, the Public Health Advocacy Institute WA has developed a road safety advocacy program of work that focuses on establishing partnerships across a range of public health organisations to develop and deliver advocacy in support of road safety.

This paper provides the range of advocacy approaches that have been adopted to place road safety on the public health agenda including:

- Establishment of a health advocacy advisory committee to guide and support road safety advocacy strategies
- Development of support materials (including website, factsheets) to promote road safety advocacy strategies from a health perspective
- Developing an advocacy toolkit to support road safety
- Working with the media and key opinion leaders to promote road safety and health agendas

Road safety is everyone's business. There are no other agencies in Western Australia who are providing public health advocacy in road safety and this project provides an avenue for road safety to be placed firmly on the public health agenda.

Keywords

Road safety advocacy; public health

Introduction

Traditional road safety approaches that focus on behaviour change have contributed to significant improvements in road safety and road fatalities.¹ Many countries, including Australia, have recently seen a 'levelling off' in the reduction of fatalities and road injuries suggesting that a change in the approach to identifying key strategies for preventing road safety trauma is needed.¹

Based on programs in the Netherlands and Sweden, the Western Australian (WA) government and the Road Safety Council (RSC) developed a road safety strategy that was related to both the Safe System and Vision Zero approach. Whilst advocating for a system that is tolerant of injuries, within a Safe System approach there is a focus on responsible use of the system. In this way, the concept of shared responsibility and safe road use was developed.²

Road Safety in Western Australia using the Safe System Approach

The twelve year strategy, Towards Zero Getting There Together 2008 – 2020, was developed based on four key concepts: the limit of human performance; the limit of humans to tolerate force; shared responsibility; and a forgiving transport system.² This also involved a shift in method and approach to prevent fatalities and injuries within the transport system.² Using this approach recognises that road users will continue to make mistakes and there is the need to reduce the consequences of these.¹ Central to this approach is an understanding and acknowledgement that the human body is limited to withstand a certain

level of physical force. The aim is to develop improved crash management so that no individual road user is exposed to a crash force that is likely to result in fatal or serious injury. In addition, the focus is on shared responsibility that provides a holistic approach to managing the interactions between the four cornerstones of the safe systems approach.^{3, 4} Using this approach, the interaction of the system components (ie., vehicle, infrastructure, road user, safe speed) is considered rather than each component separately.¹ It has been estimated that approximately 16,000 people would be prevented from a fatal or serious injury on WA roads if all four key areas of the strategy are implemented effectively over the 12 year period.²

Safe road use

The objective behind safe road use is to prevent fatal or serious injury on WA roads through influencing all road user behaviour to ensure that all users are compliant, alert and safety conscious.⁴ The focus for this cornerstone is upon responsible use of the transport system through the targeting of “risk taking” behaviours as well as the mistakes that road users make, such as concentration lapses and errors in judgement.⁴ All road users are included in this approach to road safety – drivers, riders, pedestrians and cyclists.

Safe roads and roadsides

The aim of the safe system approach to safe roadsides is to prevent fatal and serious injury in the long term by improving the safety of roads and roadsides so that fewer crashes occur and, if they do, severity is reduced.⁴ This cornerstone is founded on the belief that road users make mistakes and improving the safety of the roads and roadsides will reduce the number of fatalities and serious injuries when crashes occur.⁴ A range of road treatment strategies have the potential to reduce the number of crashes including: improving intersection safety, sealing roadside shoulders, removing roadside point objects, clear zone creation and installing audible edge lines.

Safe speeds

Speed affects both the risk of being involved in and the outcomes of a crash.⁴ The development of safe speeds is based on limits that are appropriate for the standard of both the road and the vehicle.

Although reducing speed limits would lead to fewer crashes, fatal and severe injuries, this strategy requires wide community agreement to implement.⁴ There are several key areas including: improved enforcement and education for reduced speeds; targeted speed limit reductions in areas of high pedestrian activity; and conducting community consultations on identifying acceptable safe speed limits.⁴ In addition to benefitting road safety, safe speeds impact in other ways including less noise, less vehicle wear and tear, and a reduction in fuel consumption.⁴

Safe vehicles

The objective of safe vehicles is to reduce fatal and serious injury through increasing the purchase of safer vehicles and/or specific safety features in vehicles including improved crash protection and other safety features in vehicles.⁴ Vehicles with advanced safety standards reduce the likelihood as well as the severity of a crash for all involved, both within or outside the vehicle. There are a range of safety improvements including Electronic Stability Control (ESC), side impact and curtain (head protecting) airbags, collision avoidance controls, and alcohol and seatbelt interlocks. Vehicles are rated annually based on the protection provided to occupants when involved in front and side crashes and are awarded a star rating out of five – more stars indicate a safer rating – and motorists are encouraged to purchase new or used vehicles based on this rating.

Road safety as a public health issue

While road safety has traditionally been viewed as the responsibility of the transport and police sectors, the health sector has an important role to play in road traffic injury prevention through a range of strategies including:

- policy development
- advocacy
- research
- injury surveillance
- services
- prevention and control and
- evaluation.⁵

Road safety continues to be a major public health issue for WA; it affects everyone, whether they drive, walk or cycle. The benefits to the health sector from improved road injury prevention include fewer and shorter hospital admissions and reducing the level of severity for injuries.⁵ This would lead to savings in terms of monetary, time and community costs. In addition, through making the roads safer for pedestrians and cyclists, more people may adopt a healthier lifestyle by walking and/or cycling.⁵ In helping to achieve a goal of strengthening the links between public health and road safety, the PHAIWA road safety advocacy program of work focuses on establishing partnerships across a range of public health organisations to develop and deliver advocacy to support road safety.

What is Public Health Advocacy?

Public Health Advocacy is about promoting and supporting changes that will improve the health and wellbeing of a community and involves working together to influence others. It involves creating and maintaining effective coalitions, advancement of a public policy initiative through the strategic use of news media,⁶ and applying information and resources that will provide systematic change in the way people in a community live.⁷ It also often involves bringing together different groups to work toward a common goal.⁸ Advocacy can be planned in a logical manner but in many cases it is a reaction to an event or issue. With this in mind, advocacy involves both reactive and proactive actions; can be used as part of a community initiative; and involves strong relationships and partnerships as well as creativity, innovation and a commitment for the long haul. Advocacy also requires passionate, well informed individuals and organisations to be proactive and also reactive when presented with windows of opportunity to further a cause.

Advocacy has no prescribed or clearly determined method but is about finding combinations of strategies that may be unique to further each specific cause. Figure 1 provides examples of some strategies that can be used as part of a comprehensive approach to advocating for change.



Figure 1: The advocacy wheel

Source: Stafford, J, Mitchell, H, Stoneham, M, Daube, M. *Advocacy in Action: a toolkit for Public Health Professionals*; Second Edition. Perth: Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia; 2009

Promoting Road Safety through Public Health Advocacy Project (Healthy Roads)

Viewing road safety as a critical public health issue is the overall philosophy for the Healthy Roads project, while ensuring that the focus is supportive of the ORS's systematic approach to road safety. The project, funded through the Road Trauma Trust Fund, aims to develop an advocacy framework to add value to and complement the work currently conducted by the ORS that will ultimately lead to a reduction in the number of fatalities and serious injuries on the road. While this is a special project for the PHAIWA, it fits within the overall strategic direction of the Institute and its broad range of partners.

The Healthy Roads project provides support for the WA Office of Road Safety, Towards Zero Getting There Together road safety strategy. The three key focus areas for the project are:

1. developing an understanding and support for road safety advocacy among public health leaders, organisations and individuals;
2. fostering capacity building and knowledge sharing related to road safety advocacy among public health leaders, organisations and individuals, as well as across all levels of government and the community; and
3. establishing partnerships across a broad range of public health organisations to develop and deliver a road safety advocacy framework.

The advocacy framework

The advocacy framework for the project, informed by best practice and evidence-based policy and research, will investigate existing links between road safety and public health and will identify a range of strategies to strengthen these links. In addition, the framework will be aligned with the current ORS Road Safety Strategy.

To achieve this, the framework will build upon available evidence and develop strategies to:

- integrate public health advocacy opportunities to complement work carried out by the ORS;
- generate support for road safety from the public health community; and
- ensure that there is increased and sustainable support for the implementation of the framework.

In addition, the framework will involve a range of strategies that will include media advocacy, political advocacy, organisational advocacy and community based advocacy to assess the potential influence these have on converting "concern" for road safety into "concerted efforts" to reduce fatalities and serious injuries on roads. A review of previous public health advocacy interventions and strategies that have been successful in road safety or other specific settings or issues will determine whether similar methods may be suitable to be adapted for the project.

Advocacy strategies will be utilised to develop commitment for road safety from public health professionals. In addition, it will support collaborative efforts of all stakeholders enabling them to jointly address the problem as well as raising the community concern and awareness that road safety is a public health issue of significant and unacceptable proportion.

A range of strategies are being used to address the focus areas, including:

- establishing a broad-based health advocacy advisory committee who provide guidance and support for the road safety advocacy strategies thereby ensuring the involvement of a range of health agencies;
- working with health organisations and health professionals to promote support for road safety activities;
- developing an advocacy toolkit with a specific focus on road safety;
- developing support materials (including a website, a range of fact sheets, key papers) to promote road safety advocacy strategies from a health perspective;
- working with media and key opinion leaders to promote road safety and health agendas;

- monitoring a range of media to identify public health and road safety issues to identify opportunities for future advocacy opportunities and directions;
- providing a continuing resource to inform and stimulate involvement of health organisations and health professionals in road safety; and
- linking with other public health advocacy programs that can support road safety.

The focus for the project is on both short and long term consequences of road injury for individuals, families and the community. In addition, it will provide a resource that is kept up-to-date to inform and stimulate the continued involvement of health organisations in advocating for road safety. While there are a range of expected outcomes for the project, some of the key outcomes include:

- the generation of objective researchers and public health advocates in the area of road safety who are able to articulate persuasive arguments to address road safety as a public health issue;
- the development of innovative public health advocacy strategies that contribute to reducing fatalities and serious injuries on WA roads;
- increasing the level of support for road safety issues among the public health community;
- develop and foster opportunities for advocacy strategies to be integrated into current road safety programs to facilitate continuation of these relationships into the future; and
- generation of more collaboration with and commitment from a range of stakeholders, including the private sector, to engage in public health advocacy strategies to reduce fatalities and serious injury on WA roads.

Conclusion

Road safety is everyone's business. There are no other agencies in WA who are providing public health advocacy in road safety and this project provides an avenue for road safety to be placed firmly on the public health agenda.

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