

NYSPHC Educational Series: Policy Engagement Follow Up Responses

Dr. Wendy Weller

January 11th, 2023

Question 1:

Thank you, Dr. Weller! This was a wonderful presentation. I am wondering your thoughts on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the policy process as it relates to public health?

WW Response:

I am glad you enjoyed the presentation. You raise an interesting question. I think it may be hard to tell how the pandemic impacted the policy process as it relates to public health until we are faced by a similar challenge. The pandemic was a special case of policy making in which things were happening very quickly and in real time without a lot of information (and in some cases misinformation). Although that isn't completely uncommon when making policy, this was a particularly "acute" example of trying to make policy in real time with very little understanding of the virus. One thing that the federal government and many states did during the pandemic was declare a Public Health Emergency (PHE). Declaring a PHE allows the federal government and states much more flexibility in how funds are used, expansions in who is covered by public insurance programs (e.g., Medicaid), how and where people can get healthcare (e.g., telehealth), and other changes in existing policies. It also allowed states to do things like mandate mask wearing (something the federal government didn't do). Without such flexibility, it would have been very hard to quickly address the pandemic. For example, having to pass a law that would require mask wearing indoors would be very difficult to do quickly, if at all.

Most states have allowed their PHE declarations to expire (these are temporary and need to be renewed on an ongoing basis until no longer needed) and the federal government may do the same (it was set to expire on January 11, 2023). But it will be interesting to see if some of the temporary changes resulting from the Public Health Emergency declarations end up being continued by the federal government or states through policy changes using more typical policy channels. For example, the federal PHE declaration made providing and receiving telehealth easier during the pandemic. That may continue even if there is no longer a current public health emergency.

Of course, there were some people opposed to allowing the federal government and states to change things by declaring a public health emergency (feeling that they had too much power), which may make it more difficult (at least politically) to declare a public health emergency in the future.

Question 2:

Since policy is hard to change as an individual how do you suggest finding an interest group that supports your ideas and working on similar agendas?

WW Response:

One thing I would do, if you haven't, is really think about your specific interests and your thoughts on them, which may help you narrow down groups that are most relevant. A good place to start may be with the New York State Public Health Association (NYSPHA), which is affiliated with the American Public Health Association (APHA). Both NYSPHA and APHA cover lots of areas within public health and provide opportunities to get involved. APHA (I'm not sure about NYSPHA) has "sections" that represent major public health disciplines or programs that you can join to focus on specific public health areas.

Question 3:

Very informative presentation - thank you and great questions as well!!! I have little knowledge of what I am asking but with domestic terrorism involving gun violence there is so much adversity to gun reform - how will we ever change as a nation - will public policy ever influence? Especially with NRA \$ controlling.

WW Response:

This is a great question and one I think many of us grapple with. We could have a long, interesting discussion on this. In fact, I have my students usually do an activity on gun violence where they represent the very wide range of stake holders involved and debate different policy options for addressing the problem and it can definitely be eye opening. Although some policy steps have been taken to address gun violence, a lot of this has been at the state level rather than the federal level. Of course, this means that there is huge variation across the country in policies that try to address gun violence. Unfortunately, I don't foresee (at least in the next 2 years), any major new federal laws being passed addressing gun violence, but some states may continue to add new laws that try to address the issue. In the absence of major federal legislation, some Presidents and some governors have used executive orders to try and do some small things to address gun violence. For example, President Obama did this after the school shooting in Newtown, CT.

I think it is also important to continue to look at gun violence as a public health problem and address it through public health approaches. Policy is important, but it can be used together with other community programs to address the root causes of gun violence. And, indeed, you see this happening in many communities, especially those disproportionately impacted by gun violence (they just don't always get a lot of attention).

Question 4:

Thank you, Dr. Weller, for this great presentation and for sharing your depth of knowledge with the group-- Two questions, Dr. Weller, in this particularly challenging legislative environment, do you anticipate a shift to even more legal challenges and policymaking at the regulatory level?

WW Response:

I do think that there may be more challenges to both laws and regulations in the future at the federal level, but that may also depend on the composition of Congress and the Presidency in the next few years. Given the current composition of the U.S. Supreme Court, some groups or individuals who are opposed to certain existing public health relevant laws or regulations may litigate with the hope that the case will eventually reach the U.S. Supreme Court and the laws/regulations will be overturned. All that said, there may be a trend to using the regulatory process rather than the legislative process to modify existing policies soon. This ties in somewhat to my response to your second question

Question 5:

And what are your biggest concerns on the federal level related to laws affecting public health policy in Congress?

WW Response:

Congress is interesting at the moment because the Senate is controlled by Democrats and Republicans have a very slim majority in the House. This will make it very difficult for any legislation to pass in the next two years because a bill would have to pass both the House and the Senate. It is unlikely that the Senate is going to support anything coming out of the House and vice-versa. For me, the biggest concern related to public health is the prospect of deep cuts in funding to public health, which is already underfunded (something that came to light during the pandemic).