

# PUBLIC HEALTH REACHING ACROSS SECTORS

**Strategies for Communicating  
Effectively about Public Health and  
Cross-Sector Collaboration with  
Professionals from Other Sectors**

**A FrameWorks Strategic Brief**

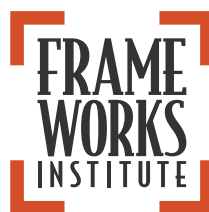
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# Introduction

Building community health requires different sectors of society to work together to build a strong, stable foundation that supports the health of all members of the community. Public health professionals understand and espouse this, and are deeply committed to helping other sectors embrace it too—not only as a shared responsibility but also a powerful opportunity. Forward-thinking initiatives aimed at improving health outcomes are often closely aligned with, and even mutually reinforcing of, sector-specific goals. Professionals in sectors outside of public health, however, typically struggle to see the connection between the health of the community and their work. This represents a significant challenge for public health because it impedes the field’s ability to forge new partnerships with other sectors and hinders its broader mission to help strengthen the foundations of community health.

With support from the de Beaumont Foundation and the Aspen Institute’s Health, Medicine and Society Program, as part of the Public Health Reaching Across Sectors (PHRASES) Initiative, this report identifies a set of evidence-based framing strategies that were designed and developed to enhance communications between public health and four other sectors: Housing, Education, Health Systems, and Business. It offers guidance on how messages can build understanding among professionals in other sectors about the field of public health and the value of collaborating with public health. In providing effective ways of communicating about the field of public health, these strategies also help other sectors understand how their work affects, and is affected by, the health of the broader community.

The framing recommendations outlined in this Strategic Brief are empirically shown to shift thinking and attitudes within the four sectors of interest—Housing, Education, Health Systems and Business—in productive ways. The recommended strategies will foster an enhanced knowledge of, and greater appreciation for, Public Health 3.0 as an evolving field of practice that attends to underlying social determinants of health.<sup>1</sup> The recommendations encourage public health professionals to demonstrate knowledge of the challenges facing other sectors, and emphasize possibilities for collaboration and partnership. When engaged in these ways, other sectors feel more empowered to address challenges through a public health lens. Instead of focusing on crises in public health, this strategy foregrounds an aspirational and inspirational vision of how cross-sector collaborations can lead to health promotion and prevention, and not just remediation. Ultimately, the communications strategies presented here increase other sectors’ enthusiasm and support for, and therefore willingness to engage in, meaningful cross-sector collaborations.

# Research Methods

To arrive at the recommendations below, we applied Strategic Frame Analysis®—an approach to communications research and practice that yields strategies for reframing social issues in order to change the discourse around an issue. This approach has been shown to increase understanding of, and engagement in, conversations about public health and other scientific and social issues.

This work builds on earlier research, which included interviews with public health experts interviews, interviews with sector leaders, and content analysis of media discourse and materials from public health organizations.

Earlier research by the FrameWorks Institute identified how sector leaders in Housing, Education, Health Systems, and Business view public health, and how they think about cross-sector collaborations. In the report *Public health reaching across sectors: Mapping the gaps between how public health experts and leaders in other sectors view public health and cross-sector collaborations*, these views were compared and contrasted with the understandings of public health professionals. The full research report, which describes the gaps as well as overlaps in thinking between these different groups, is available online at [www.phrases.org](http://www.phrases.org).<sup>2</sup>

The following sources of data inform the findings and recommendations included in this report.

## PEER DISCOURSE SESSIONS

FrameWorks researchers conducted 16 peer discourse sessions to test communications hypotheses and ideas. These were conducted in Atlanta, GA, and Chicago, IL, in November 2018 and February 2019. Each session included eight or nine participants who work in a decision-making role for organizations in one of the four sectors of interest. Participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm, and the recruitment process was designed to provide diversity in the types of organizations for which

participants worked (e.g., size of organization; non-profit/public vs. for-profit/private; specific type of work or industry). These sessions were designed to meet the following research objectives:

- To uncover how sector professionals work with and publicly negotiate the cultural models of their work, health in general, cross-sector collaborations, and the role of public health.
- To explore how different ways of framing public health and cross-sector collaboration affect thinking and discussion of these topics with the subject groups and discussion of these topics. Participants were exposed to various types of frames designed to promote understanding of and support for public health and cross-sector collaborations, including:
  - nine values or issue frames making different cases for why collaborations with public health are necessary
  - four functions or roles that public health can perform in service to other sectors
  - three metaphors or analogies explaining the social determinants of health and the work of public health
  - four metaphors or analogies explaining public health data and the ways in which public health data and expertise inform or help the work of other sectors
  - two valence frames explaining the consequences of collaborations with public health for the work and goals of other sectors.

Peer discourse sessions were conducted iteratively, in two rounds, to enable researchers to gain initial insights and build on these in subsequent testing. Because our Business sample for cognitive interviews was small, in the first round of sessions with Business professionals, we extended the portion of the sessions that was designed to uncover cultural models in order to gain more data on default patterns of thinking.

# Framing Recommendations

Strategic framing is about knowing both what to *say* and what to *avoid saying* to help people reason productively about a topic. The strategies described below were designed to enable the public health field to communicate more effectively with professionals in each of the four sectors of interest. These strategies build understanding of what public health does and can do, and increase support for—and motivation to engage in—future collaborations with the field.

## **Recommendation #1: Demonstrate your familiarity with the sectors you wish to engage by avoiding broad generalizations and acknowledging subgroups.**

### **The challenge**

Each of the Housing, Education, Health Systems, and Business sectors is internally diverse. Professionals within each sector have divergent specialties, priorities, perspectives, and concerns. This is especially true of Business sector professionals, who see themselves as part of firms and particular industries rather than as part of a broader Business sector.

For this reason, messages aimed at an entire sector—which appear to lump everyone together—are likely to feel impersonal or irrelevant to those on the receiving end, and may therefore turn potential collaborators away. Compounding this risk is the fact that public health professionals are already perceived by other sectors to be somewhat “out of touch” and detached from on-the-ground initiatives being carried out in other fields.

### **What framing can accomplish**

Communicating directly with other sectors provides an opportunity for public health professionals to demonstrate an understanding that each of these other sectors maintains a diverse professional workforce and encompasses a wide range of goals as well as challenges. By simply acknowledging another sector’s heterogeneity—and, where appropriate, demonstrating understanding of key divisions or distinctions within a sector—public health professionals can represent themselves as knowledgeable, credible, and valuable partners.

## How to do it

Instead of talking about “the education sector” or “the business sector,” refer to the specific subgroups within each of the sectors that your communication aims to reach. Messaging to Health Systems professionals, for example, should reflect an understanding that operational solvency is often a central concern for people working in hospital administration, whereas health care providers, such as those in the ER or clinic, will be more focused on each individual patient. Similarly, housing professionals who work on issues like affordability and homelessness have a very different vantage point than market-rate developers, and messaging to the Housing sector should explicitly acknowledge these differences.

Communications intended for audiences in the Education sector should be savvy to important differences in mandates and priorities of those working in elementary or secondary education versus those working in higher education. The particular attributes of the larger community in which a school or university is located also significantly influence how education professionals prioritize their responsibilities and understand their roles.

Several critical distinctions exist within the Business sector, which must be acknowledged in communications produced by public health. For example, professionals who work for individual firms operate differently from those representing entire industries, and concerns vary widely between industries as well. Likewise, professionals at big, small, family-owned, board-run, local, global, and other business types all have varying interests, obligations, and objectives that strategically framed communications should reflect.

## **Recommendation #2: Use the *Foundation of Community Health* explanatory metaphor to build understanding about the social determinants of health and illuminate the importance of public health in the community.**

### The challenge

Professionals in other sectors are mostly unaccustomed to thinking about the “social determinants of health.”<sup>3</sup> They tend to assume that health is shaped primarily by individuals’ choices and medical care, rather than underlying social factors. Even Health Systems professionals, who are most familiar with the term and concept, associate it almost exclusively with risk factors and harmful environments that influence health in a negative way, rather than seeing how environments can actively promote good health. Because of this gap in understanding, use of the term on its own, without sufficient context and explanation, invites multiple problematic interpretations. Such interpretations can threaten rather than support the mission of public health, for example by laying blame at the feet of individuals who experience poor health outcomes, stoking fears about government overreach, collapsing numerous health issues into the topic of health care provision, or obscuring opportunities for community health promotion.

## What framing can accomplish

Building an effective explanation of social determinants into communications can encourage professionals in other sectors to see health not just in individual or medical terms, but as a feature of the community. Beyond describing social factors that can either damage or improve specific health outcomes for a population, an effective frame can help people understand health in more proactive, intersectional, and structural terms. Given the significance of social determinants to the field of public health, this enhanced knowledge helps other sectors see what public health professionals care about, begin to appreciate what public health professionals do, and see how their goals may be aligned with the goals of public health.

## How to do it

Use the *Foundation of Community Health* metaphor to build understanding about the social determinants of health—including what they are and how they work—among other sector professionals who have limited familiarity with the concept. Here’s one way this metaphor can be explained:

The health of our community is like a building—it depends on a strong and stable foundation. Things like quality education, safe and affordable housing, access to healthcare, and employment opportunities structure positive health outcomes for everyone in important ways. As public health professionals, it’s our mission to build thriving communities, so we work closely with many other sectors to assemble a solid foundation that supports long-lasting good health for us all.

FrameWorks research found that the *Foundation of Community Health* metaphor fosters productive thinking among sector professionals in multiple ways. First, by framing health as something that is actively constructed, it facilitates thinking about protective factors and positive conditions that promote good health. This offers a helpful alternative to the common understanding of health as merely the absence of illness, and nurtures more holistic but less developed understandings of health.<sup>4</sup> As one research participant said, “it’s about making sure communities can thrive, not just survive.”

Second, the *Foundation of Community Health* metaphor facilitates a shift in thinking away from health at the individual level toward conceptualizing health issues at an aggregate level. It communicates an asset-based approach, in which communities experiencing poor outcomes are seen as integral to the development of solutions, rather than associated with “problems” that public health professionals must be called in to “fix”. This is especially important to professionals in the Housing and Education sectors.

Finally, *Foundation of Community Health* encourages a collaborative, cross-sectoral understanding of public health. It clearly conveys that the many different issues tied to a community’s health are connected to one another, and therefore urges



professionals in all sectors to see that they must work together to achieve shared success. Additionally, the metaphor clarifies that ensuring a strong foundation is itself the mission of public health. This helps other sectors appreciate that public health professionals work on lots of different issues and do lots of different things.

The research revealed critical insights about how to use the *Foundation of Community Health* metaphor most effectively, generating three clear recommendations:

1. **Avoid placing public health in a leadership role.** In applying the *Foundation* metaphor, it's best to avoid depicting public health professionals as the “foremen/forewomen” or “architects.” Doing so is likely to appear presumptuous or even threatening to professionals in other sectors—most of all to professionals in Health Systems, who see themselves as leaders in the health sphere.
2. **Explain rather than list the social determinants of health.** The social determinants of health, as a framework, is far-reaching, highly varied, and extraordinarily complex. FrameWorks research found that for people who aren't thinking and talking about this on a regular basis—in other words, who are not professionals in public health—it's a tricky concept to wrap one's head around. As a result, more thorough explanation is needed in order to build other sectors' understanding of social determinants. Rather than simply listing social determinants and asserting their importance, communicators should use the metaphor to explain *how* social factors support or undermine community health.
3. **Use the term “foundations of community health” as a new name for social determinants that offers a fuller explanation.** Given the current landscape of assumptions, a single, standalone phrase cannot generate understanding of the social determinants. That said, the phrase “social determinants of health” is particularly vague and fraught. A more effective way to reference the concept within communications, where a label is required, is “the foundations of health” or “the foundations of community health.” This alternative language activates the *Foundation* metaphor outlined above. To be effective, the metaphor must be elaborated—the new name is *not* sufficient—but within a fuller explanation, this new term can help focus attention on the importance of working with others to improve community health.

**Using the Upstream metaphor:** Among public health professionals, the social determinants of health are often explained using the language of “upstream” factors. We explored this metaphor in peer discourse sessions and found that it is highly effective for talking about *prevention* of health problems, but it is not effective in building understanding of health *promotion*. The metaphor helps sector professionals see the need to move upstream to screen out or remove sources of harm, but it does not enable them to think about adding things upstream—taking proactive actions—to produce good health. Professionals also struggled to use the metaphor to think about cross-sector collaboration. So while the metaphor remains effective for talking about traditional prevention

efforts, when communicators are looking to broaden thinking about public health to bring into view health promotion and cross-sector collaboration, the *Foundation* metaphor should be used instead.

### **Recommendation #3: Illustrate how the field of public health is transforming to meet twenty-first century needs.**

#### **The challenge**

All four of the sectors we researched hold a narrow and outdated view of public health. They tend to think of public health as a concept, as opposed to a field of practice, that refers to the medical needs assessment of a population. Because of this limited and deeply entrenched view, it can be jarring for other sectors to learn about public health professionals' involvement in broader social issues, like job training or homelessness, which they see as not directly health related and therefore more appropriately addressed by a field such as social work.

#### **What framing can accomplish**

Misperceptions of the field of public health do have some grounding in reality. While the field has evolved, it historically did have narrower functions, and while its evolution is well underway, there are parts of the field that have not yet broadened their focus. To avoid pushback from people who are familiar with this history or have worked with parts of the field whose evolution is a work in progress, communicators should explicitly acknowledge that public health has evolved from what it used to be and is still transforming. In describing this transformation, communicators can highlight where the field is going—and make clear that it is adopting innovative approaches that are increasingly responsive to the needs of the modern world. Discussing the transformation from traditional public health to Public Health 3.0 minimizes the risk of confusion and makes it possible for professionals in other sectors to see the field as broader in focus and more forward thinking than they had assumed.<sup>5</sup>

#### **How to do it**

Be specific about how public health is transforming. Communicators should describe the particular features of the field's current shift in focus—for example, moving from just managing and preventing crises towards promoting health, from minimizing risks towards maximizing benefits, and most of all, from understanding health as a standalone topic to one that sits at the intersection of countless issues that all have social causes as well as consequences.

A particularly effective communications tactic involves focusing less on examples that are frequently cited—like public health's role in the Ebola outbreak and the nineteenth-century cholera epidemic, which were raised by sector professionals during FrameWorks research—and more on new stories that clearly point in the direction the field is going. (For more on this, see Recommendation #7.)

## **Recommendation #4: Leverage public health professionals and allies currently working in or with other sectors as *Messengers* to highlight commonalities and underscore shared goals.**

### **The challenge**

FrameWorks research reveals that professionals from other sectors think of different sectors as occupying different worlds, with their own values, objectives, and language. Each sector is proud of its specialized knowledge base and distinct skillset, and also somewhat wary of professionals from other sectors encroaching on its “turf.” This territorialism poses a direct challenge to public health professionals seeking to collaborate with other sectors, particularly on issues that sit outside of what is narrowly perceived to be the domain of public health.

### **What framing can accomplish**

Overlapping concerns and priorities between public health and other sectors abound. There isn’t a need to generate common concerns, but rather to help professionals in various sectors see that they already exist. Well-framed communications can demonstrate, rather than simply stating, that a substantial number of the initiatives being carried out simultaneously in different sectors—and to an even greater extent, the goals being pursued—are ripe for coordination and collaboration, because they are already mutually supportive and closely aligned.

### **How to do it**

Our research found that participants are more receptive to messages delivered by professionals in their own sector, whereas messages that come from public health professionals are more likely to be met with a degree of uncertainty or skepticism. The communications opportunity that presents itself here is for professionals whose understanding spans public health and another sector—of whom there are many—to be featured as spokespersons and messengers. This tactic not only highlights commitments that are shared across multiple sectors, it also creates an opening for expanding thinking about the field of public health itself by showcasing the breadth of relevant competencies and practical functions it entails. Here’s a (fictional) example of how this could work in practice:

As a middle school principal, I’m reminded every day that healthy environments enable kids to show up more often, participate more fully, and perform at their best. That’s why my school district has partnered with public health professionals to kickstart “Westside Walks”—a program that encourages physical activity for all by enhancing our city’s walkability. So far we’ve re-painted crosswalks, improved street lighting, converted carpools into pedi-pools, and even published a map showing the features of various routes. Visit our website to see where our feet take us next!

## Recommendation #5: Frame collaboration as empowerment.

### The challenge

Health Systems professionals see themselves as being on the front lines of the fight against poor health, inside the four walls of the hospital and in the community. They are therefore likely to sideline the role of public health. In contrast, the Education, Housing, and Business sectors don't necessarily feel responsible for health outcomes and, if they do, restrict that responsibility to the particular students, residents, or other populations they directly serve. For these different reasons, professionals from each of the sectors bristle at appeals for collaboration if they are perceived as public health trying to tell them what to do. Health Systems professionals think this isn't an appropriate role for public health, and professionals from other sectors resist being directed by people who don't share their mission or their focus on their constituent base. As a result, none of the sectors are inclined to forge new partnerships or adopt joint initiatives without being convinced that doing so will preserve their autonomy and honor their existing commitments.

### What framing can accomplish

Effectively framed communications can help assuage professionals' fears about being "told what to do." Affirming the priorities of other sectors, and acknowledging their valuable contributions, is key to this task. Likewise, conveying public health's desire to support other sectors' ongoing efforts and help further their respective missions goes a long way towards helping sector professionals see collaboration as an asset rather than a liability.

### How to do it

Use the lexicon of "empowerment" to describe how collaborating with public health can "energize" the missions of other sectors, "fuel" their ongoing initiatives, and "power up" their potential for impact and sustained success. FrameWorks research found this to be a compelling strategy for emphasizing that public health sees itself in a complementary and supportive role. Here's an example of how you might use this lexicon in practice:

We are eager to join *forces* with the Housing Finance Authority in order to help *generate* solutions to insecure housing; *fuel* your ongoing efforts to end homelessness; *champion* a *strong* foundation for community health; and *propel* your important work *forward*.

Other words that can help: **boost, strengthen, enhance, surge, energy, force, amplify, capacity, drive, movement, advance, lift, accelerate, fuel, charge, augment, power, empower, ramp up, generate, thrust, bolster, momentum, fortify.**

## **Recommendation #6: Appeal to *Value of Investment*, a deeply held and widely shared value, to orient thinking toward tangible long-term gains.**

### **The challenge**

Though it plays out differently in each of the sectors, economic sustainability is a major concern for all of them. This preoccupation functions as a potential barrier to collaboration in at least two ways. First, it encourages small-picture thinking, for example, focusing on the level of individual departments or firms that manage their own budgets, rather than on entire school systems, industries, or society as a whole. Second, it causes reticence about investing precious resources into new partnerships or unverified social endeavors, which can seem like irresponsible risks. Professionals in the Business sector are especially reluctant to engage with public health for these reasons, as they tend to view relationships in transactional terms—entities either help or hurt their bottom line. For all four sectors, though, financial concerns significantly up the stakes of the question, what's in it for me?

### **What framing can accomplish**

Effective communications affirm the importance of saving costs where possible and managing resources effectively, but at the same time expand thinking beyond individual budgets, quarterly earnings, and balance sheets. Framing can help other sectors see investments in community health as a way to connect their own immediate financial objectives and decision-making to long-term social and economic goals.

### **How to do it**

Prime communications with an appeal to *Value of Investment*: a cultural value shared by professionals across all sectors. The concept it conveys is this:

Successful organizations manage their resources carefully to align short- and long-term goals. Public health professionals want to work collaboratively with other sectors to save money in the short term whenever possible, and make wise investments over the long term that support community health, increase efficiency, and reduce unnecessary costs for everyone.

FrameWorks research found this value to be easily understood and appreciated by professionals in all four sectors, especially when accompanied by evidence to support how—and precisely which—costs can be saved. As such, the value's frame effects are enhanced when it is used in conjunction with a compelling success story (see Recommendation #7).

While *Value of Investment* productively orients thinking among professionals in all of the sectors, it operates a little differently in each of them. Here are some tips for each sector.

**Education and Housing:** The idea of saving money and time productively leverages Education professionals' concerns about having too few resources and, generally, too much to do. It similarly appeals to the Housing sector's sense of being under-resourced and overworked, though a subset of Housing professionals are wary of allowing their commitment to improving communities to be overshadowed by dollars and cents. As one research participant said, "I would never have that conversation with someone—that it's good for the bottom line." For these professionals, the practical *Value of Investment* is most effectively paired with a moral appeal to *Community Responsibility*, which together paint a compelling picture of what sustains their work. Here is what combining these values might look like:

Improving the quality of life in a neighborhood by ensuring that all families have safe and healthy homes requires dedicated labor, money, energy, and time. By joining forces, housing and public health professionals can pool valuable resources, and use them more efficiently to sustain this important work.

**Health Systems:** The salient point for Health Systems professionals is that collaborations with public health could lead to better efficiency and effectiveness, thereby helping hospitals and practitioners provide quality health care services to their patient population. When communicating with leaders in this sector, public health professionals can also use *Value of Investment* to argue that collaborations with their field could lead to effective investments and strategies outside the four walls of the hospital that can help not only provide more health care services to a greater number of patients, but meet new accountability requirements (e.g. community benefits) and adapt to new financing mechanisms that are value-based and focused on improved health outcomes.

**Business:** The Business sector is also enticed by *Value of Investment*, but given that this goal already directs their operations and they think of themselves as well-equipped to achieve it, Business professionals aren't immediately convinced that public health adds to their ability to maximize profits and limit costs. In communications aimed at Business professionals, the value should be accompanied by particular details and evidence about which costs can be cut and how, in both the short and long term.

Especially in cases where immediate cost savings are uncertain or limited, providing a detailed multi-year plan for economic efficiency and sustainability represents a more effective approach. However, short- and medium-term demands on Business sector decision-making cannot be ignored. A proven communications strategy is to complement *Value of Investment* with an appeal to corporate social responsibility and company image. By highlighting that businesses' brands

are strengthened when their social contributions are recognizable to their surrounding communities, communicators can help Business professionals see how collaborations to improve community health also directly benefit them.

## **Recommendation #7: Share vivid success stories that link cross-sector collaborations to the concrete benefits they deliver.**

### **The challenge**

Many professionals—most notably in Education—feel spread thin by the demands of their work, and perpetually overburdened by the responsibilities they carry. Even when they recognize a relationship between their sector-specific objectives and the health of the broader community, and therefore understand collaboration with public health as potentially beneficial, they still struggle to see it as feasible. Unfortunately, the most well-known public health success stories, which could in theory provide some clarity and guidance about what the field can offer, carry unhelpful associations that make it hard for professionals in other sectors to relate. This fact, combined with existing perceptions of public health professionals as impractical “big thinkers” rather than hands-on “doers,” only exacerbates the feeling that collaboration is a fine but abstract idea—and often just not in the cards.

### **What framing can accomplish**

The burden of proof is on public health to demonstrate that collaboration is possible and practical, and that it actually works. The good news is that a lot of concrete evidence of the benefits of collaboration exists, because numerous collaborations have been incredibly successful, with many and vast rewards. By bringing this evidence, and the stories that surround it, to bear in their communications with other sectors, strategic framers in public health can anticipate and convincingly answer the “but how?” question that lingers in prospective collaborators’ minds.

### **How to do it**

Offer detailed success stories to demonstrate, rather than just assert, that public health collaborations are fruitful for all parties involved. In our research with sector professionals, participants engaged much more enthusiastically with real-world scenarios than with topics lacking specificity or devoid of context. In fact, messages that lacked specificity and concreteness were sometimes met with frustration and complaints of vagueness, which had a backfire effect. Participants frequently requested illustrative examples from researchers when they weren’t provided. When participants lacked examples, they tried to come up with their own—drawing from a limited or narrow pool of familiar cases to do so. This underscores the need for public health communicators to not only offer up examples, unprompted, but to choose the right ones.

The best examples of successful collaborations are contemporary ones that clearly exhibit the new-and-improved attributes of Public Health 3.0<sup>6</sup>. FrameWorks research found that while simply describing public health as an innovative field does not significantly increase participants' willingness to collaborate, providing evidence of the field's adaptive practices and forward thinking *does*. Similarly, the claim that healthy communities are instrumental to achieving sector-specific goals only packs a punch when accompanied by an actual case study that reveals this to be true. Keep in mind that what puts the “success” in a success story, in the eyes of other sectors, is its ability to exemplify how collaboration will lighten their loads.

Note: To maximize frame effects, book-end stories of successful collaboration with appeals to *Value of Investment*, as described under Recommendation #6 above.

## **Recommendation #8: Foreground public health's data expertise.**

### **The challenge**

As discussed above, professionals in other sectors have limited understanding of the varied skills and expertise of the field of public health. In particular, while every sector values and relies on data, none has a very comprehensive or even clear understanding of how public health engages with data. Other sectors have even less clarity about how they might work with professionals in public health to gain access to, utilize, or otherwise benefit from the field's data expertise.

### **What framing can accomplish**

Messages that exhibit the breadth as well as depth of public health's proficiency with data can help other sectors appreciate the utility and applicability of the field. Additionally, by establishing an association between data expertise and public health, communicators can frame the field as a valuable partner, and encourage other sectors to consider collaborating with public health as a way to meet their various data needs. Research found that foregrounding the data expertise of public health was more effective in generating an appreciation for the value of public health than foregrounding other skills and functions, and that doing so opened space for a reconsideration of the field.

### **How to do it**

Bring a greater focus on data into public health communications aimed at prospective collaborators. Importantly, this focus should be tight and crystal clear. Cite specific examples of the field's knowledge and experience with collecting, analyzing, sharing, and using data—not just to track morbidity rates and describe trends or report on other health-related problems, but to deepen understanding of health issues in ways that lead to innovative solutions and



improved outcomes. Communicators should make sure to connect data expertise to the generation of solutions, as discussing data without bringing in solutions may reinforce stereotypes of public health professionals as impractical researchers who are just “pushing numbers.” For further guidance on how best to frame data expertise, see Recommendation #9 below.

### **Recommendation #9: Use the *GPS Navigation* metaphor to explain how public health’s data expertise can help other sectors move towards innovative solutions.**

#### **The challenge**

A particularly limiting feature of how other sectors think about public health data is the perception that these data primarily consist of descriptive statistics that function as a diagnostic tool. This way of thinking diminishes understanding of the value and the extent of the field’s expertise. It also obscures the potential for data to enable solutions thinking and lead to improved health outcomes.

#### **What framing can accomplish**

Effective communications can capitalize on the power of metaphor to explain how public health’s data expertise works. More specifically, effective messages can enhance other sectors’ understanding of what public health can use data to do. With the right framing, professionals in other sectors can come to recognize that data, in the skilled hands of public health professionals, can help spark cutting-edge ideas, revolutionize on-the-ground practices, and implement state-of-the-art solutions.

#### **How to do it**

Use the metaphor of *GPS Navigation* to explain how the field of public health engages data in innovative and forward-thinking ways. Here’s the story to tell:

GPS is a powerful tool for visualizing and navigating complex terrain. Given a set of parameters, it quickly and accurately maps out multiple routes, citing each one’s pros and cons. Public health professionals serve this function too. We draw on a wealth of data to chart out routes from where we are as a community to where we want to be—identifying critical intersections, anticipating road blocks, and adapting to changes as needed along the way. Most of all, we put our data expertise to work to drive positive outcomes and move needed solutions forward.

The imagery and language of this explanatory metaphor—particularly around visualization, geography, connection, and intersection—helps other sectors think productively about their overlapping issues of concern with public health. This leads Housing and Education professionals to see collaboration as essential.

*GPS Navigation* also guides Health Systems and Business professionals to a clearer understanding of how collaboration with public health could work, though for these sectors the metaphor's active ingredient is innovation. By framing public health professionals as creative problem-solvers and future-facing practitioners, *GPS Navigation* inspires creative thinking about how the field's data expertise might be harnessed by other sectors to help innovate solutions to their own most pressing challenges.

Note: While using this metaphor flexibly and creatively, steer clear of messages that put public health professionals in the driver's seat or describe the field's role as "giving directions." Likewise, be careful not to imply that public health professionals pick "the best" route, or any single route for that matter, which could cue up turf battles and stoke concerns that public health professionals will step in and tell other sectors what to do.

## **Recommendation #10: Keep it positive. (Aspiration and inspiration are far better motivators than urgency and fear.)**

### **The challenge**

Real public health problems exist—and some are approaching, or have already reached, crisis levels. As a result, public health professionals frequently want to sound the alarm for professionals in other sectors and make them see that working together is urgently needed in order to meet the challenges our communities face. Given other sectors' limited understandings of the field and how it relates to them, however, crisis messages not only fail to engage potential collaborators and inspire action, they trigger suspicion, degrade trust, and feed fatalism—all of which makes successful collaboration far *less* likely.

### **What framing can accomplish**

In every challenge lies the opportunity to solve it. Framing can feature these opportunities by invoking shared values, offering explanation, providing context, and detailing helpful examples. In projecting a constructive "can-do" attitude and positive outlook, the field of public health can advance a mobilizing vision—of safer, healthier, and more prosperous communities—that professionals in all sectors see themselves as having a role in and are inspired to help build.

### **How to do it**

For starters, drop the crisis frame. Instead, describe a challenge or problem in a balanced or even optimistic tone. It's also important to give equal—if not more—attention to proposed solutions. The latter should at least match the former in levels of emphasis and detail.

FrameWorks research found that amplifying problems to convey urgency is ineffective with professionals in Housing and Education, in part because this comes across as condescending. As one participant said, “We know we’ve got problems to deal with—we need resources, and to be empowered.”

With Business professionals, the tactic falls flat because the sector doesn’t particularly see itself as facing crises. Business and Health Systems professionals are inclined to see claims of dire, large-scale problems requiring immediate action as attempts to distort reality and manipulate behavior. Both sectors therefore reject them as “scare tactics.”

Our research further revealed that sector professionals respond poorly to negative valence frames; in other words, to messages framed as “If we don’t do X, we will have Y negative consequences.” To all four sectors, these kinds of messages can feel threatening, fear mongering, or bullying. Health Systems professionals further associate negative valence frames with government agencies constraining the ways in which they can do their work by adding more requirements for reimbursement. All of this casts a shadow over public health as a field. A better strategy is to inspire professionals in other sectors and boost their sense of collective efficacy with messages highlighting that “If we work together, we can achieve X, Y, and Z.” Here are a few other ideas for how to flip the script:

- *Instead of:*  
“If we don’t share insights across sectors, there’s no telling what knowledge will be lost.”  
  
*Try:*  
“If we share insights across sectors, we’ll significantly expand our knowledge base.”
- *Instead of:*  
“By accepting a silo mentality, we are limiting the impact of our work.”  
  
*Try:*  
“Through collaboration, we can double the impact of our work.”
- *Instead of:*  
“We can’t address the challenges of our respective sectors on our own.”  
  
*Try:*  
“Together we can tackle the challenges our respective sectors face.”

# Conclusion

The recommendations described in this brief are intended to establish some general guidelines and evidence-based best practices for public health professionals to communicate about the field's perspective, functions, expertise, and value as a partner to other sectors. These strategies were designed in particular for interactions with Housing, Education, Health Systems, and Business professionals, whose own expertise and efforts carry significant implications for community health. They are proven to build greater understanding, encourage generative thinking, and spark productive discussions—all of which increases the potential for innovative cross-sector collaborations that feed the ultimate shared goal of healthier communities and improved real-world outcomes.

# Endnotes

1. DeSalvo, K. B., Wang, C., Harris, A., Auerbach, J., Koo, D., O'Carroll, P. (2017, September 7). Public health 3.0: A call to action for public health to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. *Preventing Chronic Disease* 14. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd14.170017>.
2. L'Hôte, E., Volmert, A., Davis, C., and Down, L. (2019). *Public health reaching across sectors: Mapping the gaps between how public health experts and leaders in other sectors view public health and cross-sector collaborations*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
3. FrameWorks research reveals this to be true to a much lesser extent among forward-thinking leaders in each of the sectors. For details, see L'Hôte, E., Volmert, A., Davis, C., & Down, L. (2019). *Public health reaching across sectors: Mapping the gaps between how public health experts and leaders in other sectors view public health and cross-sector collaborations*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
4. See the description of the *Health as Full Life* cultural model in L'Hôte, E., Volmert, A., Davis, C., & Down, L. (2019). *Public health reaching across sectors: Mapping the gaps between how public health experts and leaders in other sectors view public health and cross-sector collaborations*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
5. DeSalvo, K. B., Wang, C., Harris, A., Auerbach, J., Koo, D., O'Carroll, P. (2017, September 7). Public health 3.0: A call to action for public health to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. *Preventing Chronic Disease* 14. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd14.170017>.
6. DeSalvo, K. B., Wang, C., Harris, A., Auerbach, J., Koo, D., O'Carroll, P. (2017, September 7). Public health 3.0: A call to action for public health to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. *Preventing Chronic Disease* 14. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd14.170017>.

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The FrameWorks Institute is a think tank that advances the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis<sup>®</sup>, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains, and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, build public will, and further public understanding of specific social issues—the environment, government, race, children's issues, and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth, ranging from qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks<sup>®</sup>, and in-depth study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative & Effective Institutions.

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