



MASMA Forum: Using Voluntary Social Marketing Programs to Control Asthma

Speaker: Laurie Stillman, Executive Director of the Asthma Regional Council

On April 5, 2006, the Massachusetts Social Marketing Association (MASMA) was pleased to host a forum with Laurie Stillman. The executive director of The New England Asthma Regional Council (ARC), a program of The Medical Foundation, Stillman is also the former director of the Massachusetts Public Health Association, and a veteran of the state policy world, with one foot each in the environmental and public health arenas.

Ms. Stillman spoke about how environmental and public health concerns are often intertwined. Asthma—a major public health problem—is often triggered by environmental factors such as exposure to cigarette smoke, dust mites, furry pets, cockroaches, diesel fumes from trucks and buses, and other pollutants. More and more young children suffer from chronic asthma, particularly those in densely urban and low income areas. New England has the highest regional rate of adult asthma in the nation.

ARC was launched in 2000 to address the environmental aspects of asthma. ARC collaborates with health, housing, education, and environmental organizations that interact directly with communities at risk for high rates of asthma. Stillman described ARC's overall mission, and talked about her success in attracting the attention of media to influence policy about asthma, public health, and related environmental concerns. She thinks media is critical because environmental health is a political issue, and much of any problem and solutions are beyond the direct control of individuals. Yet only 3% of our health care budget is focused on public health.

Stillman's suggestions for focusing on the media include these:

- Decide what makes a "sexy" story.
- Get a major paper to do an "exclusive"—release first, with quotes, interviews, etc. Policy makers look to what the media are paying attention to, and most media outlets look to the major papers for their stories. Call the editorial staff, tell them you would like them to cover the issue, and tell them why (quickly; don't waste their time).
- Focus press releases specifically (e.g., by state, audience)

She also outlined what she called the "4 Es", similar to the 4 Ps of the Marketing world:

- 1) Evaluate—learn who your target audience is, how they think, their needs assessment, the opportunities and barriers. Stillman sees surveys, phone or written, as excellent ways to gather information. Surveys also build awareness of the problem, build relationships with players, and helps people take ownership over the problem and its solutions.
- 2) Elucidate—Stillman also promoted reports, issue briefs and white papers as important ways to give credibility to the program. These tools show the data that exists behind the problem. The media also love such reports.
- 3) Educate—Stakeholders need to be educated about the problem. This can be done in a conference, symposia, many other ways. Funders also love these educational efforts because their names are highlighted.
- 4) Elevate—The issue must be elevated to the policy level. Develop nontraditional partners (like health insurance companies in this case) to support you.