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Towards a Framework for an American National Strategy for Social Marketing in Public Health

The independent review of the first English national strategy on social marketing (It's Our Health, 2006) found that the adoption of social marketing in a systematic way will increase the impact and effectiveness of health-related programs and campaigns at the national level. This is not the first acknowledgement of the potential contribution of social marketing on a grand scale. Indeed, both the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department for International Development (DFID) promote the extensive research and practice of social marketing programs around the world. There are, of course, many other examples both from home and abroad.

The English experience, in particular, raises an interesting question about the need for a national strategy to promote social marketing in the US. The purpose of this paper is to present a draft framework for further discussion of this strategy, extending if possible to its possible final form and process for achievement.

The US Social Marketing “Community”

First, it may be useful to think of social marketing as a “community” in the US, as opposed to a single profession, discipline, field or other line of work. Community has at least two elements that are useful for this purpose. Community connotes individual, groups and institutions interacting with one another rather than just a population defined organizationally, demographically or geo-politically. So the social marketing community has training, research and practice components and includes various kinds and levels of organizations (governmental, private, academic, professional, etc.) In addition, these interactions are based on common interests, both general and specific, rather than on a scope of professional knowledge or practice. In other words, the community may include those interested in public health as well as those interested in environmental sustainability, education or other areas of “social good.” I believe it is well-known that social marketing includes more than just public health, but I feel less confident about the recognition that to be successful, social marketing in public health will have to involve partners in different professions, contexts and primary interests.

So planning is about the entire community, not only public health or universities or government agencies...an important, albeit challenging starting place.

The American Value Context:

I think we have an opportunity to create and achieve a strategic plan for social marketing in the US. My experience in England taught me that there is somewhat of an aversion to the term “marketing” in that society. In America, the aversion is more about the term “social”—giving rise to visions of increasing taxes, more government, run-amok welfare and even an American version of the “nanny state.” Fortunately, “marketing” resonates with core American values of enterprise, individual choice,

business is “good” and responding to consumer demand. With thoughtful planning, we can position social marketing as an approach to public health (and other non-commercial goods) that is customer centered—asking about consumer wants and needs instead of prescribing what they “should” want and need. This notion couples nicely with social marketing as an approach that can significantly improve impact and mobilize resources more effectively than more traditional, “top-down” methods.

The aim of a strategic plan is to create an integrated national capacity to use social marketing as a systematic approach to design and implement effective customer-centered programs of behaviour change for promoting public health, reducing inequalities and achieving other social benefits. Capacity is the key word here. It recognizes, first, that our current capacity is underdeveloped, second, that development is a long-term process and third, that it involves complex relationships between training, research and practice

What would the strategic planning process include?

The details on the planning process are probably best left to another time, but the general nature of the process merits some discussion. This should be a funded planning process, including a core staff, organizational home and operations budget to support meetings, planning documents, consultants, travel and other expenses. One or more of the governmental or private organizations (or both) may be willing to support the process. The process should be transparent and inclusive, probably starting with a small representative, planning group then expanding to a more participative model with specific workgroups.

The American social marketing strategic plan

What would the result of a national social marketing strategy look like?

This national strategy is intended to achieve both horizontal and vertical integration of social marketing—horizontal meaning across governmental, academic, professional, financing, public/private sectors and “fields of practice”. Vertical integration pertains to national, federal/state/local governmental, community, agency and individual sectors of activity.

Policy oriented:

First of all, social marketing would play a key role in the design and implementation of national policy, both in federal and private sectors. There are at least two existing precedents for this role. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) strongly supports and uses social marketing as a systematic approach to health, sustainability and other behaviors throughout the world. A second precedent refers to the customer-centric nature of the American business and economic sectors—where choice, exchange and competition are central. Indeed, social marketing is often defined as the adoption of commercial marketing technologies. It would not be enough just to practice at the program level and leave the policy development to

others. Social marketing needs a strong policy base as a leverage point for other aspects of the strategic framework. Its use and funding must become part of the national agenda for public health and other areas of interest.

Inclusive partnerships:

Next social marketing would have to be widely applicable across policy areas and fields of practice. Social marketing is useful in health, sustainability, public safety and many other areas. While public health may provide a key launching pad for a national strategy (and the primary objective of this framework), it must accommodate these other areas as equal partners in order to build a critical mass necessary to drive policy, funding and other critical elements. This is a difficult requirement. The fear of losing control and getting co-opted by another stronger (or more energetic) group lurks in the shadows. However, it is unlikely that public health either can or should achieve a national strategy monolithically. Just imagine the power of a technology for behavior change that transcends individual fields and sectors.

Practice Standards and credentialing

Defining social marketing as a community of experts and practitioners makes a logical first step. The objective here is three-fold: (1) to clearly identify the area of knowledge, technology and practice in which all social marketers participate; (2) to establish the competency and ethical standards of practice and (3) to create a process for officially recognizing the satisfactory training and achievement of those standards. This process could be similar to that of the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing (NCHEC) that provides Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) credentials to qualified professionals. There are many other examples from other fields and disciplines.

Community and Professional organization

Professionalization and credentialing activities would take place in the context of a community and professional organization (CPO). The primary roles of the CPO are to:

- Promote professional social marketing
- Serve the members of the organization
- Provide an organizational home for the profession
- Provide policy leadership and advocacy for the profession (including research and training) and its various interests
- Financially support the CPO and related activities

Research

Social marketing already benefits from a wide array of research in public health and other areas. However, as the methodology is applied to a wider variety and more extensive number of behaviors, both the opportunity for and necessity of research will become more apparent. One of the goals of a national strategy for social marketing should be a generous and stable resource base for research, especially including applied research and evaluation. These resources could derive from either government or private resources (or both) and support social marketing research

across various acute and chronic health problems as well as other community and policy objectives.

Education and training

A national emphasis on social marketing will require new sources for training. These should encompass undergraduate, graduate and adult/continuing education and training ,

Partnerships

ATHO, NACCHO, CDC, USAID, RWJ, Abt, PSI, NIH, environmental groups, mental health, substance abuse.

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