

THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Solutions for Treatment Expansion Project (STEP)

*A Guide to
Gaining Approval
for a Residential
Alcohol and Drug
Treatment
Facility*



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To request additional copies of booklets in this series, or for more information, call (619) 474-8844, e-mail info@publicstrategies.org or write to IPS at 148 E 30th St., Suite B, National City, CA 91950. The booklets can also be viewed and downloaded at www.publicstrategies.org.



Introduction

IN SEEKING OFFICIAL APPROVAL FOR AN ALCOHOL AND DRUG TREATMENT FACILITY IN a community, a strategic plan and an understanding of the political process are critical first steps. Structuring a strategy based on research and broad community support early in your efforts will provide a solid foundation to advance your agenda. It allows you to be proactive rather than reactive in your quest for a use permit.

This booklet is part of a series of guides to community change that address the elements in siting an alcohol and drug treatment facility in a community. It's designed to demystify the process for individuals and groups working toward that goal, outlining the steps of organizing an alliance of supporters.

The guides are based on the four integrated components of the Environmental Change Model: applied research and data collection, which includes the research, assessment and planning essential in developing an overall strategy ("Community Zoning"); defined policy, which drives the process to create community change ("The Political Process"); community organizing, the effort to build support among community members and organizations ("Gaining Community Allies"); and media advocacy, a tool used to elevate the issue on the public agenda through the use of data, authentic spokespersons and clear, consistent messaging ("Accessing the Media").

A thorough planning process will help you decide whether to take on a task, how it should be done and when to implement the actions that will lead to your goal. Each of the supporting strategies should be aligned with the goal of siting a residential treatment facility. Therefore, the plan needs to be flexible, timely and woven into the fabric of the overall plan to maximize results.

Be Prepared

FIRST YOU WILL NEED TO DEVELOP AN ISSUE-BASED STRATEGY TO PRESENT TO decision-makers and to follow in addressing community concerns. An assessment of the use permit process and the neighborhood will provide your organization the information for

advanced planning. Consider creating an issue briefing or fact sheet that underscores the assets a treatment facility can bring to a community. Cite examples of programs similar to the one you are proposing.

When assessing a community, it is important to note that alcohol and other drug use is strongly linked to certain crimes, traffic crashes, home and industrial accidents, medical problems, scholastic failure and family problems. Show decision-makers and citizens alike what happens when people do not get the treatment they need.

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With basic assessment techniques that compile selected crime statistics, the extent of substance-abuse problems in your area will become readily apparent. Show decision-makers how treatment has positive outcomes when alcoholics and addicts rejoin society as productive citizens. Give them the figures they need to show constituents the economic benefits to the community. Help them demonstrate that treatment is an essential, cost-effective means of reducing related costs of drug problems far beyond those caused by addiction. Elected officials, armed with this information, can use it to help justify to their constituents the need for treatment facilities.

An initial assessment of the local use permit process will show the requirements and steps to obtain a permit. It is important to get to know the city planner, since he or she will process your application and make recommendations to the Planning Commission on your use permit at a public hearing. (See “Community Zoning” for more detail.) Also consider the impact of political timing and election cycles. Decision-making bodies may change, creating a shift in your

target audience and strategy. The thrust of your campaign should peak prior to the final decision of the City Council.

Navigating the System

YOUR CITY WILL LIKELY HAVE A PLANNING DEPARTMENT THAT COORDINATES permit applications and makes recommendations to the Planning Commission. The planning director and the planner assigned to your permit can have control over the process. Therefore, you should know the philosophy of the local Planning Department. For example, is it more pro-business or pro-public-health? The availability and quality of the data and information you provide can influence the approval decision.

The Planning Commission provides the initial formal oversight by the city in the form of a hearing to approve, amend or deny a permit. You should research the factors that might affect the Planning Commission's findings. Know its members' philosophies and voting records on similar issues in the past. Do the commissioners represent specific segments of the community? Are they elected or appointed? Do they tend to vote independently or as a block? How do the Planning Commission and the City Council get along?

The final decision on your permit rests with the City Council, which might decide to amend your permit application, sending it back to the Planning Commission for review. Factors that may influence the City Council are similar to those facing the Planning Commission, but pressure from voters and constituents is more intense. City Council members often gauge their support on an issue by the present and future political environment. Aim to create a win-win situation by providing accurate and compelling information and demonstrating strong constituency approval for your project.

Whether your target audience is the Planning Commission or City Council, you need to identify solid supporters, committed opponents and uncertain votes on your permit. Determine education and advocacy efforts needed to keep supporters, neutralize opponents and win uncertain votes. Coordinate your efforts with supporters, concerned community members and the media to line up the votes you need.

Remember that all is not lost if the City Council decides against issuing a use permit for your residential treatment facility. If the decision was based on discriminatory zoning ordinances or practices, such an action may be against the law. The Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibit the Planning Commission from denying a use permit simply because a program will serve alcoholics and addicts. Even if the underlying reason against the use permit is NIMBY (“Not in My Backyard”), the reasons and evidence must address other concerns.

Decision-Maker Assessment

OFFICIAL DECISION-MAKERS ARE YOUR PRIMARY TARGET AUDIENCE IN THE EFFORT to site a treatment facility. Contact the Planning Department early in the process and provide the staff information on your organization, its accomplishments and plans for the facility. Review public records for similar use permit applications that succeeded or failed to discover what barriers they faced. Work closely with the planner assigned to your permit application, and provide accurate information in response any concerns raised. This planner will be making recommendations to the Planning Commission. The final approval rests with the City Council if an appeal is filed.

In this part of the process, be sure to find out:

- How the Planning Commission has voted in the past on treatment facility permits.
- Whether it’s possible or appropriate to contact the Planning Commissioner prior to the hearing.
- Who will organize your presence at the hearing and be your spokespersons.
- Who your opposition is and what their arguments are.

City Council members are often influenced by small, vocal groups of residents fearful of a treatment facility infiltrating their neighborhood. These opposition groups tap into the emotions, fear and lack of understanding by residents, and they can be effective in winning policymaker support.

Therefore, the campaign to win over a majority vote in the City Council must be fought on two fronts. First, policymakers need to have factual information in support of locating your facility and educated on the benefits to the community. Second, you must demonstrate strong voter support for your project to boost the prospects of City Council endorsement.

Key members of your advisory group should meet personally with City Council members to debrief them and discover where they stand on the issue. If a specific member strongly supports the siting of the treatment facility, ask whether he or she would be willing to speak out to the media on your behalf. There may be some who adamantly oppose your facility and some who are on the fence. Your efforts should focus on those whose decision you have the greatest chance of influencing.

Following your meetings with City Council members, you should have a good idea of how they will vote and how to align your campaign to win sufficient support for your use permit. The media strategy should demonstrate organizational and constituency support behind locating your program in the community and create a stable platform for a decision-maker to endorse your issue. Politicians do not want to alienate segments of the community, so your goal is to demonstrate that the majority of voters support local treatment opportunities. You need to be louder and more effective in your argument than the opposition.



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Stakeholder Recruitment

ONCE YOU HAVE ESTABLISHED THE FRAMEWORK FOR YOUR OVERALL STRATEGY, including your goal and target audience, it is time to begin the

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detailed planning to obtain a use permit. The first planning meeting should include a discussion of stakeholders in the community, including those who already support your issue and those whose support you will need to reach local decision-makers.

One way to bring supporters together for your cause is to create of an advisory group willing to engage in the effort to site your treatment facility. (See “Gaining Community Allies.”) They should become experts on the issue to advocate your position at all levels of the decision-making process.

Stakeholder recruitment should be ongoing and intentional throughout the campaign. As you continue to re-evaluate your overall strategy, identify key individuals and organizations to support specific elements in your strategy. When you plan recruitment of supporters you should know what you want them to do.

On a local level, you might need help accessing a particular City Council person or require an introduction to the director of an influential community group. Presenting your plan to or becoming a member of a local collaborative can lead to contacts helpful in gaining further endorsements for your permit.

The goals of your community outreach campaign include building support in the neighborhood, enlisting dynamic residents as part of the advisory group, seeking authentic spokespersons and understanding the specific concerns of the community. If you are able to convince local residents to support your facility early in the process, it can take the wind out of the sails of the opposition. These supporters have the potential of having the greatest impact on other residents and policy-makers.

Lessons Learned

YOU CAN ALSO BENEFIT FROM LEARNING ABOUT PAST CAMPAIGNS TO SITE treatment facilities. Especially by looking at those that were unsuccessful, you can try to anticipate and avoid some common pitfalls. One recent example in the East County of San Diego shows the importance of strategic planning and media advocacy.

In 2001, the 25-year-old McAlister Institute appealed to the City of El Cajon after its application for a use permit was rejected. McAlister's permit application satisfied the requirements of the city, but public opinion was largely opposed.

The community had little accurate information about treatment facilities and their real impact on neighborhoods. Their impressions were largely emotional and based on fear, and their attitudes were mirrored by the City Council. As Mayor Mark Lewis of El Cajon acknowledged when asked about the city's decision on a radio program, "We had to take into account the fear and ignorance of the constituents."

The concerns most often raised in this case were: proximity to an elementary school; safety, specifically that of children; fear of possible interaction between the elementary students and residents of the treatment facility and their visitors; security of the facility; the impact on nearby property prices; and the belief that treatment does not work. The issue clearly was not with the highly regarded McAlister Institute itself, which has operations around the county (including outpatient services in El Cajon) and which was generally agreed to have a solid track record.

At the time that McAlister was appealing the permit, voters in El Cajon were fed inflammatory and misleading information about treatment centers. If a comprehensive strategy for accessing the political process had been followed — along with a media advocacy campaign — the permit might not have been denied in the first place. The public and politicians clearly needed more information and education about treatment facilities. They lacked facts, statistics and real experience, all of which demonstrate the merits of treatment centers. Those speaking in opposition to the McAlister's permit application at the El Cajon City Council Hearing

repeatedly addressed the numerous bed and care facilities already in El Cajon and ignored the fact that these were not alcohol and drug treatment facilities.

A media plan should supplement your overall strategy with timely and effective newsmaking opportunities. (See “Media Access and Advocacy.”) The specific role of the newsmaking might change throughout the campaign. Initially, you might want to raise the issue higher on the public agenda and provide supporting information to educate the public. There might be a time when responding to the opposition’s argument is necessary. The target audience might shift to decision-makers in the planning department or to the City Council during the appeal process, and the vehicle used to carry your message might move from television to the editorial page.

A Regional Approach to Treatment

BUILDING BROAD SUPPORT FOR YOUR CAMPAIGN CAN INCLUDE A REGIONAL strategy. How can you access other treatment organizations facing the same NIMBY issue in attempting to site a treatment facility? How have they been successful? What other organizations face similar issues? What can be learned from affordable housing advocates or those wanting to provide healthcare options in a community?

Participating in a regional strategy can offer long-term solutions to eliminate the need to fight same battle over and over again to site a residential treatment facility. It can also provide a regional media campaign strategy that supports local efforts and can demonstrate county, state and national concern about the NIMBY issue.

The Alcohol and Drug Service Providers’ Association (ADSPA) of San Diego County is working toward creating a more objective decision-making system for cities in which residential treatment facilities have applied for permits. Such a system would help reduce the influence of subjective and emotional outcries from a handful of vocal neighbors. A regional approach would foster partnerships among organizations facing the same challenges in neighborhoods throughout San Diego County.

ADSPA is now seeking to establish a standard set of criteria for the siting of treatment facilities for all municipalities in the San Diego County region. ADSPA proposes that if the criteria were met, the permit would be approved. Ideally, all the municipal planning departments would adopt a standard set of guidelines to approve a use permit and provide an objective process for treatment program applicants to follow.



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