

Module #1: Understanding Public Policy

Objectives

- Students will define public policy and understand policy-making structures.
- Students will become familiar with the different levels of policy development.
- Students will become engaged in a community service project that provides them with the opportunity to participate in public policy issues in their community.
- Students will interact with public policymakers.

Context



Public policy education is the process of empowering individuals with information, training and leadership skills to help them to become more engaged in decision making related to policy. ASPIRA believes that our youth have a right to develop, learn, and become contributing members of our democratic society. Our work with youth enables them to learn from one another and collaborate closely—across boundaries race and culture, economics, and political stance, to achieve better results for our communities.

Handouts & Resources Needed:

Handout 1.1 Public Policy Primer
Handout 1.2 Key Questions About Public Policy
Sheet of paper – one for each participant
Pens/pencils
Journals
Flit chart/blackboard

Activity #1: Overview of Public Policy (30 min)

Procedure:

- Icebreaker
- Divide students into groups of 5 per group and appoint a recorder and have each group review and discuss Handout 1.1 (Public Policy Primer) and Handout 1.2 (Key Questions About Public Policy)
- Each group should be able to discuss and answer the following questions related to public policy
 1. What is public policy?
 2. Who are public policy makers?
 3. How do we influence public policy? What are the levels of public policy making? What does funding have to do with public policy?
- Once each group has completed their questions have each group share their answers with the larger group

Debriefing

Handout 1.1

Public Policy Primer

What is Public Policy? Public policy is a system of decision-making that is used to resolve problems and make positive changes in the community. Decisions are made by groups of people cooperating together to identify problems, decide what the best solution to those problems might be, and then to promote these policies in legislation.

Legislature/Congress: *A group of people who make, change, or repeal laws at a local, state, or national level.*

There are three main public policy bodies:

1. **Elected Bodies**
2. **The Courts**
3. **The Streets or Everyday People**

1) **Elected Bodies** can be found at the local level (including school boards and city council) at the national level (Congress). Wait a second...

- *What is Congress?* Congress is the legislative branch of the federal government. Each two term of the U.D. Congress is called a Congress. A session of Congress may continue for the entire year, and bills under consideration remain alive from one session to the next. Bills that have not been approved by the close of the Congress die automatically.
- *And What does it do?* It makes the laws needed to govern, determines which government agencies and programs will be created, and approves all funds spent by the government. Congress has specific powers: to collect taxes, raise armies, declare war, regulate commerce, and provide for the general welfare. It can also act more generally by passing any law necessary to execute the powers granted to it by the Constitution. Congress enacts legislation but cannot implement it. That's left to the executive branch and the President...¹

...At each level we elect someone from our community to represent our wants and needs. This is important because the goal of policy is to help solve the problems of individual communities, not to create sweeping laws that ignore our diversity. The process of policy-making is thus built around compromise.

2) **The Courts** are used when decisions cannot be made by the elected bodies. The Courts are not as open as the elected bodies and decision-making is made in a more structured process with strict rules. If parties cannot agree, the courts use a process to try to create a

¹ Adapted from: The Dirksen Congressional Center, "Congress Link":
http://www.congresslink.org/print_basics_congress.htm

winner and a loser—the winner’s policies are then enacted. However, if this does not work, unresolved issues move to The “Streets.”

- 3) **The Streets** are just what they sound like: the people in our neighborhoods and communities. We can debate an issue by writing letters to the editor or protesting at City Hall meetings at the state and federal level, by handing out fliers about an issue, making posters or giving speeches. Sometimes, when enough people rally behind an issue, movements are started that force Elected Bodies to take action once again to try to resolve the problem.

How does a bill become a law? First of all, what is a bill?

Bill: *A proposal made to a legislative body that has not yet been enacted or made into law.*

Processing solutions to societal problems into legislations is the key function of Congress. There is often little agreement on the problems government should tackle and less agreement on the most desirable proposed solutions.²

Before a bill is presented to a legislature, an **idea** is developed first. Think about the problems tackled by the Civil Rights Movement, or the issues discussed in response to protests during the war in Vietnam. After much debate and deliberation, these problems were finally tackled by government was reformed in response to the people!

An idea such as those that sparked the peace movement of the 1960’s might come from an interest group, a public official, or any communities like the one you live in, hoping to solve a problem. *What inspires you? What about political cartoons? Motivational speakers? Or the news and other media outlets?*

Most people belong to some type of group—families, classes at school, and clubs or organizations, for example—and most of these groups work toward a common goal that came from an idea. Often groups reach decisions about these goals through a voting procedure. Cooperation among the members of a group is required, and groups need rules and leaders to get things done. It is important for each person involved in a group to have a voice in deciding the rules and choosing the leaders. This is accomplished by voting, with members agreeing to follow the choice of the majority, which is more than half of the voting members. The same is true for choosing the leaders who will govern cities, towns, states, and our country.³

The Process: From Idea to Bill to Law

Once the ideas are established by a group, they require sponsorship (funds) from a legislature or members of Congress in order to be **drafted** as a bill—simply written in proper technical form. Once this is done, it is **introduced** to the House of Representatives or the Senate and is then printed. After being considered by a special committee who hear public opinions that

² From: A Bill Becomes a Law: www.congresslink.org

³ Adapted from: Congress Link: www.congressforkids.net

support and oppose the bill, amendments (changes) are made in cooperation. A bill is then presented to the governor if at the state level, or the President at the federal level. This person must then choose to veto (reject) or pass the bill. If it is vetoed, it can be voted on by the legislature or passed on to Congress—depending on the legislative level—and if it is passed, it becomes a law.

How is policy linked to finance?

In order for a bill to be drafted, it needs a sponsor. This means that a legislative body makes a formal promise to support a proposed bill with advocacy and with funds. **The Committee on Appropriations** writes the legislation that provides these funds to various subcommittees in charge of specific agencies such as the Food and Drug administration or the Department of Education. The Committee on Appropriations has the ability to pick and chose which bills to sponsor depending on what they believe are necessary (and these decisions are often influenced by their own interest). Thus, interest groups are at the mercy of their sponsor because they are reliant on their funds.

How do we influence public policy?

Goals and Credibility: We can participate in solving our own problems. We don't need a large group of people to be effective, despite what you might think. In fact, a core group of just a few individuals who are knowledgeable about an issue is really all that is needed. To be effective, your group must develop a set of goals and figure out how to open your focus to include as many different perspectives as possible in order to establish credibility.

Power: Once your group and its goals are established, it is important to use as many different kinds of social strength as possible. Because most community groups cannot rely on money, they must seek power elsewhere.

10 Types of Power:

- 1. Numbers** – The larger and more diverse the group, the more it will be considered.
- 2. Coalitions** – Combining diverse groups with common goals strengthens your cause.
- 3. Unity** – A unified, diverse group that presents a unified position is difficult to divide.
- 4. Positions** – It is important to bring credible figures from the community to bring integrity to your cause.
- 5. Knowledge** – Learn the facts about the issue and about the decision-making process.
- 6. Relationships** – Get to know policy makers and their advisors.
- 7. Vote** – Policy makers listen to voters. This is a direct way to make your voice heard.
- 8. Use Media** – Learn how to develop literature, talk to the press, the news, and the radio.
- 9. Money** – Set aside some funds to keep your group and the community informed.
- 10. Internet** – Extend your cause to the largest, most diverse community out there.

1) Dictionary.com. 7 October 2008. <http://www.dictionary.reference.com>

2) Hollister, David C. *A Public Policy Primer*. Institute for Educational Leadership. June 2007.

3) "How a Bill Becomes Law." 20 August 2008. <http://www.state.me.us/legis/lawlib/billpath.htm>

4) United States Senate Committee on Appropriations. Jurisdiction: Overview of the Senate's Role. 07 October 2008. <http://appropriations.senate.gov/jurisdiction.cfm>

Handout 1.2

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC POLICY

What is public policy?

Who are public policy makers?

How do we influence public policy?

What are the levels of public policy making?

What does funding have to do with public policy?