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Briefing Congress and Journalists on Health Policy

Conducting issue briefings on health and health care policy for policy-makers, journalists and national organization officials

SUMMARY

From 1999 to 2007, the Alliance for Health Reform conducted issue briefings on health topics for congressional staff and journalists, and created additional resources for news reporters seeking unbiased information on health issues.

Based in Washington, the alliance is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization focused on affordable health coverage for all Americans. Since 1996, it has worked with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to produce briefings for policy-makers and journalists on health issues of importance to the Foundation.

Key Results

During this project, the Alliance for Health Reform:

- Held 27 briefings for congressional staff and others, covering topics such as:
  - Patients' bill of rights.
  - Ways to encourage more employers to offer health insurance.
  - Prescription drug spending.
  - The uninsured.
  - Children's health insurance.
  - Racial and ethnic disparities in health care.

  Each briefing yielded an audiotape or a webcast for later review (see the Bibliography for list of briefings).
- Produced 24 four-page background briefs.
- Held 12 briefings for reporters in Washington, 47 briefings for journalists and editorial boards in other cities and 72 desk-side briefings for Washington reporters.

- Produced and distributed four sourcebooks, in English and Spanish, to assist reporters in covering health policy issues.
- Created a Find-an-Expert database for reporters to use when seeking sources in various areas of health to interview. By 2007, the database listed 341 experts.

Funding

RWJF provided four grants totaling $3,627,386 from 1999 to 2007 to support this project.

THE PROBLEM

Congressional staff and journalists need access to timely, accurate and objective information to help increase their understanding of complex health and health care issues, and thereby improve their ability to help make and convey health policy.

Founded in 1991, the Alliance for Health Reform provides information on the roots of the nation's health care problems and the trade-offs posed by competing proposals for change. Since 1996, the alliance has consulted with RWJF in selecting topics for briefings for congressional staff and reporters on issues of importance to RWJF, including coverage for children, the future of employment-based coverage and long-term care (see Program Results on ID#s 029298, 032283 and 034296).

The congressional briefings were designed to offer junior and mid-level legislative staff a basic understanding of key health issues so they could help their legislators make well-informed decisions on health care policy issues, according to David Colby, vice president of research and evaluation at RWJF. The briefings for journalists, held during congressional recesses, aimed to generate news coverage during slow news cycles.

CONTEXT

RWJF has frequently used policy forums as one strategy to bring about social change.

Thus, it is valuable to the Foundation's overall goals that policy-makers are well informed and thoughtful about the health policy issues of the day. Since the early 1970s, RWJF has funded efforts to help federal, state and local officials expand their knowledge of health policy issues.

Those efforts have included:

- ***National Health Policy Forum*** (NHPF) provides an opportunity for federal health policy-makers to engage in rigorous, constructive and respectful dialogue. It is nonpartisan and does not advocate for particular policy positions. While RWJF confers with NHPF staff about the topics to be covered, the forum makes its own decisions about health topics on its agenda. RWJF has provided over $14 million to

NHPF since it began supporting it in 1973. [For more information, see the *Anthology* chapter as well as Program Results on ID#s 038446 (2003–2005), 030252 (1999–2003) and 019312 (1996–1999).]

- ***Forum for State Health Policy Leadership*** provides nonpartisan information on health-care policy to state legislators and a forum for sharing ideas and developing leadership in the field. RWJF stepped in to provide core funding for the Forum (then known as the Intergovernmental Health Policy Project) in 1991 after it lost federal funding. The forum, now housed at the National Conference of State Legislatures, focuses on topics of high priority for the Foundation. Its primary audiences are new state legislators and state legislative health committee chairs. RWJF funding for the forum has exceeded $5 million. (See Program Results on ID#s 037549 and 038921.)

- **Capitol Forums on Health and Medical Care,** an initiative of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey, provided the governor's office staff, state legislators and legislative staff, department commissioners and their staff, and other key decision-makers with analysis and research on key health and health care issues. RWJF supported the effort from 1992 to 1997 with a total of $250,499. (See Program Results on ID# 023538.)

- **The Council on Health Care Economics and Policy,** which the Foundation established in 1993, brings together policymakers to address important issues facing the U.S. health care system from an economic perspective. It organizes a series of conferences on health care economics known as the "Princeton Conferences." The council is administered by the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. (See Program Results on ID#s 023281, 031827 and 035039.)

- ***State Forums Partnership Program*** established health policy forum programs in seven states between 1999 and 2006. The health policy forums provided timely, nonpartisan information and analysis to help state policy-makers make informed decisions about complex health care issues affecting their states. About 40 percent of program participants were state legislators, legislative staff or executive branch officials. RWJF's support totaled just under $3 million over the seven-year period.

- RWJF's **Synthesis Project** produces policy briefs that synthesize research findings on health issues that are important to the Foundation's programmatic goals. The briefs provide short and easy-to-read insights on complex policy topics for policy-makers and journalists. RWJF launched the effort in 2001. (See Program Results on ID# 037389.)

The grants that are the subject of this report grew out of earlier work of the Alliance for Health Reform that was supported by RWJF in 1997 and 1998. The alliance produced a series of four forums on the topic of vulnerable populations and managed care (see Program Results on ID# 029298) and published materials and held briefings on the issue of children's health care coverage (see Program Results on ID# 032283).

THE PROJECT

From 1999 to 2007, the Alliance for Health Reform continued its core work of providing health policy briefings for congressional staff and journalists. It also added new information resources. With four RWJF grants, alliance staff undertook the following activities:

1999–2001

Under Grant ID# 035055, the alliance held briefings for congressional staff and reporters in Washington, focusing on issues related to managed care and other health policy topics.

- The congressional briefings were held on Capitol Hill.
- The press-only briefings were held at the National Press Club in Washington.
- Four-page issue briefs accompanied almost all briefings.

The alliance used a separate RWJF grant (ID# 037672) to educate journalists on key health issues in advance of the 2000 presidential election by:

- Creating a sourcebook, *Covering Health Issues: Campaign 2000 and Beyond*, for reporters to use during the campaign.
- Traveling to 10 cities outside of Washington to brief journalists who might have limited access to health policy experts.
- Meeting with editorial boards from 10 newspapers, and presenting the contrasting views of health policy experts who accompanied staff on the trips.

2001–2004

Under Grant ID# 040202, the Alliance continued to organize briefings for congressional staff and for journalists based in and outside of Washington. In addition, staff:

- Prepared materials for the 2003 kickoff of RWJF's large initiative *Cover the Uninsured Week*.
- Created an online database of experts on its Web site that reporters could contact for interviews on health issues. Experts enrolled by filling out a detailed online questionnaire about their specialties and availability, thus allowing reporters to restrict their searches to experts in a particular media market, or to only those willing to take calls after hours, or those who have been interviewed by national media, or those who can speak a language other than English, among other choices. By August 2004, the site listed 300 experts.
- Made 27 trips outside of Washington to conduct desk-side briefings with some 206 reporters in San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and other cities.

- Conducted 72 individual briefings with Washington-based reporters.
- Wrote *Covering Health Issues 2003*, a successor to the campaign issue sourcebook.

2004–2007

Under Grant ID# 041830, the alliance continued holding congressional and press briefings on health policy topics such as consumer-directed health care and health information networks.

Staff updated printed materials, and worked to increase sources for the online database.

Challenges

The continual stream of new studies, data and reports during production of the reporters' sourcebook prompted time-consuming rewrites of some chapters to incorporate new material prior to printing. Issue briefs also ran the risk of being out of date if there was too long a delay between submission of a draft to RWJF and receipt of edits from foundation staff.

Attempts to increase the number of experts in the database were frustrated by complications within the registration system. Staff found that dozens of experts began but did not finish the enrollment process because the computerized questionnaire was so lengthy. Reducing the number of questions would have required expensive revision. Staff learned it was necessary to recruit many more experts than they actually expected to enroll.

RESULTS

As a result of these four grants, from 1999 to 2007 the Alliance for Health Reform:

- **Conducted 27 briefings on Capitol Hill for congressional staff and members of professional and stakeholder organizations on health policy topics such as:**
  - Patient's bill of rights.
  - Ways to encourage more employers to offer health insurance.
  - Prescription drug spending.
  - Chronic illness.
  - The uninsured.
  - Children's health insurance.
  - Quality improvement.

— Racial and ethnic disparities in health care.

Registration for the briefings sometimes topped 350.

- **Extended the reach of the congressional briefings to the general public and to key parties who were unable to attend by:**
  - — Offering audiotapes of the proceedings.
  - — Providing webcasts on the Kaiser Network, part of the Kaiser Family Foundation (see the Bibliography for details).
  - — Arranging live coverage by *C-SPAN* of some briefings.
- **Produced 24 issue briefs as background to the briefings, and disseminated copies to congressional staff, reporters, public policy officials and others across the country.** (See the Bibliography for details.)
- **Held about a dozen group briefings for journalists at the National Press Club in Washington, with lengthy question-and-answer periods.**
- **Made about 50 trips to cities across the country to conduct desk-side briefings with reporters, producers and editorial boards in their newsrooms.**
  - — Cities visited included Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Miami.
  - — Staff met with journalists from media outlets such as *Business Week, National Public Radio, CBS News,* the *Wall Street Journal* and *Time.*
- **Held 72 individual briefings with reporters' at their offices in Washington, allowing them to raise questions and ideas without competitors present.**
  - — Briefings were targeted at journalists from Midwest media outlets who, as generalists assigned to a Washington bureau, might not be intimately familiar with the complicated field of health policy.
  - — They were also aimed at health reporters from national newspapers (who may or may not have attended the group briefings) to explore story ideas in private.
- **Created and disseminated *Covering Health Issues: A Sourcebook for Journalists,* with key health policy topics and proposals for change, story ideas and experts to contact for interviews.**
  - — The first guide, *Covering Health Issues: Campaign 2000 and Beyond*, was designed to help reporters cover health issues during the 2000 Presidential campaign.
  - — Due to its popularity with reporters, the guide was updated in 2003, 2004 and 2006 and translated into Spanish.

- **Prepared a primer to kick off RWJF's *Cover the Uninsured Week* initiative in 2003.** The *On Campus Resource Guide* was designed to help future health professionals understand the reasons why so many Americans lack health coverage and some approaches to increasing coverage.
  - Staff also prepared the content for the primer for the 2006 initiative. (See the Bibliography for details.)
- **Created an online "Find-an-Expert" database to help link reporters with knowledgeable sources to interview for health policy stories.**
  - The database was divided into 36 major health policy topics, with more than 100 subtopics.
  - By 2007, the directory listed 341 experts — including RWJF grantees and staff.
  - Staff sought to increase the experts to 500 by recruiting recent speakers at the briefings, encouraging medical, hospital and health policy leaders to register.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Be mindful of others' work schedules when organizing educational opportunities for busy people with crowded calendars.** The alliance holds its briefings for congressional staff on Mondays or Fridays, which are typically slower days in Congress. The briefings take place during the lunch hour (with lunch provided), last no longer than two hours and focus on the big picture of a health policy issue rather than overwhelming the audience with details. (Grantee/Howard)
2. **Presentations on policy issues must be balanced to maintain credibility.** The alliance is careful to ensure that its presentations include a variety of viewpoints representing a range on the political scale, from liberal to conservative. (Grantee/Howard)
3. **Cast a wide net when building a database of experts.** Staff found that dozens of experts began but did not finish the enrollment process for the "Find-an-Expert" database for reporters because the online questionnaire was so lengthy. Because revising the computerized questionnaire would have been costly, staff learned it was necessary to recruit many more experts than they actually expect to enroll. (Grantee/Howard)
4. **Watch the clock so that information about critical issues doesn't become outdated.** The continual stream of new studies, data and reports during production of the sourcebook prompted time-consuming rewrites of some chapters prior to printing. Issue briefs also ran the risk of being out of date if there was too long a delay between submission of a draft to RWJF and receipt of the Foundation's sign-off. Planning for such projects must include realistic timetables that account for delays, new information and necessary feedback. (Grantee/Howard)

AFTERWARD

RWJF awarded the alliance a new grant (ID# 051498) to continue providing briefings and background materials to congressional staff and journalists through August 2008, as well as a renewal (Grant ID# 055750), which will provide briefings through November 2011.

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