



Working With Elected Officials

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This practice brief focuses on how crime prevention practitioners can strategically work with elected officials. Working with elected officials is important for the advancement of crime prevention and community safety, as elected officials can champion and influence policy and legislative change as well as strategic and funding priorities within different orders of government. A good relationship is at the centre of any effective approach to working with elected officials. There are a number of strategic considerations and tools that fit within a four-stage process to working with elected officials (1: research, 2: prepare, 3: act, and 4: maintain), which may be useful in facilitating a productive working relationship with elected officials.

BACKGROUND

This practice brief is based on the experience of a number of crime prevention practitioners as well as best and promising practices from a range of community-informed sources. Ultimately, the goal of this practice brief is to help crime prevention practitioners rethink how to develop relationships with elected officials and to provide strategies to enable improved engagement and support from elected officials.

Over the years communities and the public have learned to speak differently with elected officials, holding elected officials to unrealistic levels of status and authority. This approach has become inauthentic, neglecting the fact that, while there are certain formalities and practices that are commonplace when working with governments, elected officials are in their particular position because the people put them there. One needs to be reminded that elected officials are community members who represent and are accountable to the diverse needs and interests of the people.



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CHALLENGES FACED BY CRIME PREVENTION PRACTITIONERS

Generally speaking, working with elected officials to advance crime prevention is not always a straightforward or easy endeavour. One has to contend with competing interests, figure out how best to communicate and align one's agenda to the departmental mandates and strategic directions, and present compelling evidence for elected officials to be willing to invest in crime prevention agendas. Some of the barriers that crime prevention practitioners encounter when approaching government and elected officials can include the following:

- A lack of understanding of the complexity of an elected official's job
- Misperception of the elected official's role and their psychology
- Lack of clarity by elected officials regarding how to identify and find solutions
- Conflicting agendas between different levels of elected officials
- Finding overlap between elected official's goals and the needs of the community (particularly across party lines)
- Goal orientation (short-term versus long-term, narrow versus broad)
- Gaining consensus amongst all elected officials
- Community-level disagreement with crime prevention

IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

In order to get support from elected officials, it is paramount to build relationships in which they know and trust you (as an individual and at the organizational level). In developing any relationship there are important principles and strategies that should be considered.

RELATIONSHIP PRINCIPLES

Honesty and integrity: Being honest and maintaining integrity are critical for developing trust and knowledge that you are reliable, dependable, and principled. Catering to one's

ego is easily detected and does not bode well for their evaluation of your integrity. Such an approach may produce short-term buy-in but fails in the long run. By the time elected officials get to supper they very well could have had over 20 meetings. It is imperative that you find a way to stick out and stay in their mind that is honest and does not compromise your integrity.

Transparency and openness: Being transparent and open contributes to building trust and signalling to people that you consider the other person as having valuable thoughts and opinions and that you are interested in a reciprocal relationship that facilitates sharing.

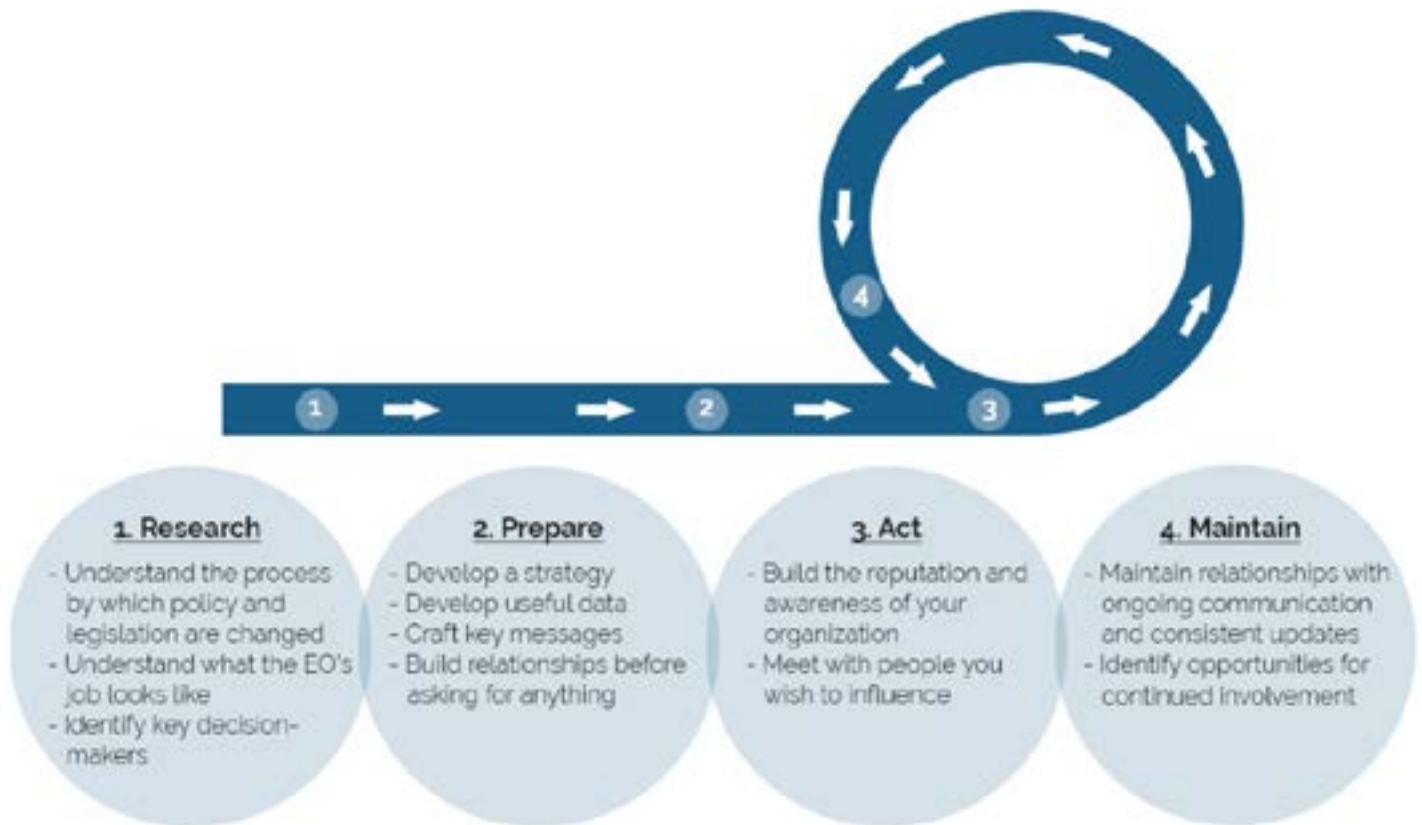
Respect: Being polite and respectful shows the other person that you value them as a person and further encourages people to be open about themselves, including what they believe in and what their values and priorities are. This is especially important when you do not agree with the other person's views. Being disrespectful will end a conversation quickly and erode trust.

Confidentiality: Being able to keep what a person tells you to yourself is critical for solidifying trust and increasing the other person's comfort level in opening up and trusting you with their thoughts, opinions, and vulnerabilities. This goes a long way to building and sustaining relationships as this introduces a shared sense of responsibility and a stronger bond predicated on mutual trust.

Win-Win: Working towards a goal that can accomplish several aspects of community life is critical. For example, if the municipality is building a new transit system consider how that system can benefit from social development approaches.

FOUR-STAGE APPROACH TO WORKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

We will now discuss approaches and tools for working with elected officials within a four-stage process: (1) research; (2) prepare, (3) act; and (4) maintain.



STAGE 1: RESEARCH

The objective of the first stage is to gather the information to develop an engagement strategy. This includes researching the formal and informal processes that you will have to navigate in order to achieve your goal(s), identify whom you need to engage, and how you can engage them.

Understand the process by which policy and legislation are changed

Understanding how policies and legislation are changed is critical prior to developing a strategy for engaging elected officials. Without knowledge of the official processes by which policies are developed and changed, it is difficult to develop a strategy to make this happen.

Understand what the elected officials' job looks like

When working with municipal elected officials, it is important to recognize the breadth and complexity of their job. The job is fast paced, very public, and spans diverse areas. Unlike in provincial and federal politics, local politicians manage a broad range of topics. Understanding the demands that the elected official is under is important later in the process when developing a strategic approach to working with them, including how to craft key messaging, how best to approach them, and how to relate the content of the ask to their agendas.

Identify decision-makers

During the research stage it is important to strategically identify who the key influencers are that would be able to support crime

prevention efforts. A useful tool that can help to facilitate the strategic identification of decision-makers is to conduct a power mapping process. This process is particularly useful when done in a group setting with overlapping yet different networks. With power mapping, the goal is to figure out who, ultimately, has the power to make the decisions to support your mission (the person with the most relevant influence) and then work backward to map out the relationships of influence between the members of the group and the key person. Once you have identified the key decision-makers, the people who can influence them, and whom you know that can help advocate on your behalf or introduce you to the key decision-makers, the next step is to choose an engagement approach (see stage 2). If, through the power mapping exercise, you discover that you know neither who the key decision-maker(s) is nor who the people are that have influence over the key decision-maker(s), it is time to do some exploratory research. You can call or visit the responsible office looking for information and/or ask people you know or who you think are in the know about who makes the decisions.

Additional consideration:

- Go further by identifying a councillor to be responsible for a particular area and identifying a champion for community safety
- Identify senior bureaucrats with whom you can connect, as they make recommendations that are often followed by other elected officials.

STAGE 2: PREPARE

The second stage focuses on preparing to engage with key influencers in government by developing a strategic approach, which includes decisions about specific strategies, communications, and tactics as well as developing supporting data, and building relationships.

Develop a strategy

With crime prevention and community safety as a guiding vision, it is important to think

strategically about engaging with elected officials to move this agenda forward. Consult CMNCP's Strategic Planning Worksheet when developing a strategy. More resources are available in the appendix.

Develop useful data

Engaging with elected officials is necessary to gain support for crime prevention and community safety within multiple levels of government. Ideally, the elected officials will support and/or drive policy and legislative change and influence funding priorities to favour prevention initiatives. An important strategy is to provide compelling data and evidence for why resources should be directed toward crime prevention initiatives. As discussed earlier in the section about building relationships, it is important to paint a picture with data that is relevant to the elected official(s). This will require developing an understanding of the elected official's primary objectives for their term in office and ensuring that the data you present make it clear that not only does supporting crime prevention and community safety not conflict with their objectives but supports their efforts. It is also worth considering what intersecting issues the elected officials—and their constituents—have to deal with, including radicalization, poverty reduction, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, cultural groups, etc.

Scope is also important for determining what data are relevant. It is important to ensure you know how the goals relate to the jurisdiction/responsibility of the level of government that you're advocating to. It is reasonable to ask them to stretch from their status quo operations a bit or to adopt a new priority as long as you outline why it remains their job. No government wants to take on the job of another level of government, so using data and examples from other parallel jurisdictions is critical (i.e., another city if working at the municipal level, another province if working at the provincial level).

CMNCP has developed a set of policy briefs, which present key data related to crime prevention in Canada. These general data points can buttress your position and the local

data that you will develop. See below for links to resources developed by CMNCP.

Craft key messages

Another component of the preparation stage is to craft the messages/communications that you will deliver to the elected officials. The messages should clearly articulate: (1) what you want, (2) what the benefits of their support will be to your organization and to the elected officials, (3) suggestions on how to make change, (4) what specifically you are asking from them (what you want them to do), and (5) what you will do to help them (e.g., field calls about community safety from their constituents).

In addition to crafting specific information directed at particular elected officials, it is important to distribute information to everyone because it is rare for decisions to be made by only one member. Develop concise information packages and distribute them to all elected officials in office and all candidates prior to an election.

Build relationships before asking for anything

Establishing relationships with people before asking them for anything demonstrates that your efforts to build a relationship are not driven purely by self-interest and motivation to move your agenda forward, which is critical for building trust. In reality, building relationships that have a solid foundation is the key to getting elected officials to really hear and consider the messages that you are communicating. They will be much more likely to consider the case for crime prevention and community safety, including the rationale, evidence-base, strategies, and how such an approach can work within their existing priorities. Because elected officials represent the interests and needs of their constituents, they have to do their best to live up to the promises they made in their campaign platforms; as such, they are more likely to be open to suggestions from people they know and trust, and in particular, from people they know are mutually invested in serving the needs of the community.

STAGE 3: ACT

Build a reputation and awareness

It is much easier to get people to take your advice and trust what you are communicating if they see you and your organization as a credible and reliable source. In order to build a reputation it is important to engage in some or all of the following: provide and support effective crime prevention initiatives; engage in critical public dialogues; write and publish articles, media-ops, and policy briefs; and facilitate or be a member of a collaborative of well-established and high-profile practitioners and influencers. Additionally, it is important to build a reputation of reliability. In this sense, it is critical to follow through on commitments.

Meet with people you wish to influence

Pre-meeting Preparation: Before engaging with an elected official, it is critical to prepare. Preparation includes: clearly identifying the meeting objectives and desired outcomes; rehearsing your points; and preparing a short (1 page) synopsis describing the issue and its effects and addresses the opposition's position, which you can give to the elected official.

Meeting Part One – Introduction: In the initial part of the meeting, it is important to quickly establish who you are, the reason for meeting, the subject of the conversation, and your personal connection to the issue.

Meeting Part Two – Main Conversation: The majority of the conversation will be dedicated to understanding the elected official's position on similar issues and presenting your position and concerns regarding the topic at hand (using personal experiences to support the position). It is critical to present your points and concerns in concise, clear language. It is commonly assumed that elected officials only think within the scope of their 4-year tenure. In reality, if you acknowledge their short-term goals but then discuss the long-term vision, often they will think about the issue beyond the 4-year time frame. Expect to be asked questions; this provides an important opportunity to present more data and information. When answering

questions, do not be afraid to say, "I don't know – but i would be happy to find out for you and send you a brief email".

Meeting Part Three – Conclusion: Being mindful of the elected official's time will increase the likelihood that the elected official will be open to meeting with you again in the future. At the end of a meeting, thank the elected official for their time, support, and help. Provide the brief written synopsis of issues and key points you prepared before the meeting as a leave-behind. After the meeting, follow up with a thank you letter, regardless of whether you felt the meeting was successful and let them know where to find you and that you might be back in touch in the future regarding emerging developments.

When possible, get a commitment of support regarding the specific issue and also as a collaborator to provide input in your strategy and how best to engage other elected officials who might be more reticent. This first meeting should be about gauging support, and, if there is support, seeking feedback on your messaging/strategy. The elected official can help you understand/identify barriers to your success and identify strategies to overcome the barriers. They can also identify appropriate timing and process. The initial goal is to find a champion; if you do not have a champion, you are not likely to succeed without major external pressure.

Things to Avoid

Rudeness, empty promises, self-righteousness, pretending to have more influence or power than you truly have, being vague, bringing up past campaign contributions or presenting a cheque during a meeting.

STAGE 4: MAINTAIN

The maintenance phase comes once the connections and relationships with the elected officials and key influencers have been established. This phase switches from a highly active approach to one that involves moderate time investment. However, maintenance of a good working relationship is critical for securing their support over the long-term.

Maintain relationships with ongoing communication and consistent updates of data and information

The key to maintaining relationships with elected officials and key influencers is to ensure that both communications and updates of data and information are consistent and ongoing. This is the phase where you turn a short-term ally into a long-term advocate; by continuing to communicate, meet, and update the elected official and key influencers, you prove that the relationship was not forged out of short-term self interest, but rather out of genuine interest in the elected official and in mutually working toward longer-term goals.

In addition to updating elected officials when new data and evidence are accumulated, another important strategy is to be aware of current events that can positively or negatively impact the elected officials. If you are doing something that addresses the issue it is a great opportunity to connect, and if you become aware of something that might impact your elected officials in the area of crime let them know. Politicians do not like surprises, so keeping them abreast of current issues is highly valued.

Important strategies for maintaining relationships over the long-term include:

- Making regular contact, honesty, and providing direct information.
- Being a reliable and credible resource by providing information and data on issues including and beyond the specific project in which you are involved.
- Thinking about their world and filtering information through that lens.

Identify opportunities for continued involvement

Identify opportunities for elected officials to continue to be involved, including opportunities to learn and to give their support. For example, you can identify (or create) opportunities for elected officials to make public presentations (community report backs, neighbourhood events, media ops), attend lunch and learns, conferences, and round-tables.

TOOLS

[Engaging with Elected Officials: Strategic Planning Worksheet](#)

[Have Influence on Public Policy: A Manual and Tool Kit On How Voluntary Organizations Can Influence Public Policy](#)

[A Way Home: Youth Homelessness Community Planning Toolkit \(Section - Engaging and Influencing Government\)](#)

RESOURCES

Best Practice for working with elected officials

[Building Relationships with Elected Officials](#)

[Public Policy Advocacy: A Best Practice Guide](#)

[Working With Elected Officials in Collaborative Projects](#)

[Community Tool Box: Building and Sustaining Relationships](#)

[Community Tool Box: Communications to Promote Interest and Participation: Chapter 14, Section 5:](#)

[Building and Sustaining Commitment](#)

[Community Tool Box: Communications to Promote Interest and Participation: Chapter 7, Section 6: Involving](#)

[Key Influentials in the Initiative](#)

[Community Tool Box: Creating and Maintaining Partnerships](#)

[Working Well With Elected Officials](#)

[Working With Elected Officials: A guide for agents and board members](#)

[Advocacy Toolkit](#)

[Expert Advice: Working with Elected Officials](#)

CMNCP Crime Prevention Data

[Crime Prevention Evidence: Action and Policy Briefs](#)

[Making Cities Safer: Canadian Strategies and Practices](#)



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