



NIH
HEAL
INITIATIVE

HEALing Communities Study

Play 1:

How to Build Relationships with Your Local Media

Conducting Media Gatekeeper Interviews

Get Started

» WHAT?

A **media gatekeeper interview** is a structured conversation with a journalist at a local media outlet that can serve as a starting point to build a relationship with them. During the interview, you can gain a better understanding of their daily/weekly publishing schedule, their audience/readership, how they prefer to be contacted, their views on the opioid crisis, and the sources they find most useful when producing stories about the opioid crisis. The information gathered can help you tailor your story pitches to these media outlets more effectively in the future.

» WHO?

Select one person from your coalition (person on the leadership team or communication champion) to serve as the media contact for all local press inquiries about HCS. This person will conduct media gatekeeper interviews, sustain relationships with journalists, and reach out to them periodically for further conversations, briefings, and submissions of op-eds, letters to the editor, and guest posts/columns. They will also act as a liaison that connects journalists with sources such as HCS subject matter experts and people with lived experience.

» WHEN?

Depending on the size of your community, and the number of media outlets identified in your community's Landscape Analysis, we recommend that you conduct between 3 and 12 media gatekeeper interviews before the campaign kickoff meeting. Having this information available will help you prepare the distribution plan for the first campaign.

» WHY?

Local media outlets often have a considerable reach and play a powerful role in setting agendas and framing issues in communities. Journalists must routinely balance significant time and operational constraints as they make decisions about the issues that get covered and how these issues are framed. An awareness of how to form and maintain solid **relationships** with local media is essential to ensuring that your stories get covered and that the coverage accurately and effectively conveys key messages to priority audiences.

» HOW?

Complete steps 1, 2, and 3 described below. This includes identifying potential media contacts, assessing whether they are a good fit, and conducting initial outreach. Be sure to review the interview script and questions as you go to conduct your interviews. Once completed, maintain relationships with journalists, and continually track your progress.

STEP 1: PREPARE

- Identify outlets to contact.
- Conduct initial outreach.

IDENTIFY OUTLETS TO CONTACT

Start by identifying the media outlets best suited for communications from the campaign and other opioid-related issues. These can include print (newspapers), broadcast (television, radio), and digital media (websites, blogs, local online groups, and forums). As a starting point, ask key informants (e.g., your community advisory board and coalition members) about the media outlets they follow to stay informed about local issues. The Landscape Analysis being done in your community will also have information about media outlets. You can also search [news.google.com](https://www.news.google.com) using a combination of keywords related to “opioids” and your location to find outlets that have covered the issue recently.

Once you have identified potential outlets, use the following questions to assess their appropriateness:

- 1. TOPICS COVERED:** Do they regularly cover news or personal stories about opioid use disorder, including treatment, recovery, medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD), naloxone, and how the community is responding to the opioid crisis? Are they mostly objective, or do they offer opinions?
- 2. REACH:** Do they appear to have a large audience (subscribers or followers)? How frequently do they publish content?
- 3. INFLUENCE:** Are they known to drive local discussion and debate? Are they read or listened to by priority groups of interest (at-risk populations; community and civic leaders; opioid treatment and recovery professionals; public safety professionals; criminal justice, corrections, and law enforcement professionals)?

CONDUCT INITIAL OUTREACH

Once you have selected the media outlets for interviews, identify the best contact person

to whom you should reach out and schedule a 30-minute interview. Ideally, this would be someone who often covers health issues or has written about opioids in the past (there is likely not a dedicated health reporter, but it does not hurt to ask). The contact could also be someone from their editorial staff or the publisher/owner of the outlet (especially for websites and certain local print/radio outlets).

Some media outlets will also have information on their website about their focus, what makes something “newsworthy,” and how they prefer to receive ideas, pitches, or content.

You can use and adapt the following template for initial email or phone outreach to schedule the media gatekeeper interviews.

SUBJECT: REDUCING OPIOID OVERDOSE DEATHS IN [COMMUNITY]

Hi [Name of Journalist],

I've been following your coverage of the opioid crisis in [community], and the article you wrote about [topic] really resonated with me [if applicable]. I am part of a coalition that's working to reduce opioid overdose deaths in [community] over the next two years as part of the [NIH HEALing Communities Study](#).

Through my involvement in the coalition, I can offer access to timely data and information about how the opioid epidemic is impacting [community] residents as you continue to cover this important issue. I can also connect you with residents who can share personal accounts of how they have been impacted and subject matter experts working on solutions. I would love a few minutes to learn more about your work and discuss how we might be able to help you with stories on the opioid issues here in the future.

Would you be available for a 30-minute call next week?

Thanks,

[Your Name]

[Contact Details]

STEP 2: PLAN

□ Review the interview script and questions.

Use the following script and questions as a starting point for conducting media gatekeeper interviews. It will be helpful to learn about journalists' daily/weekly publishing schedule and deadlines for gathering background information. You should also become familiar with their work processes, including how they stay informed about opioid-related issues, find sources and conduct interviews, make editorial decisions, and fact check the accuracy of their content drafts. Make sure to take notes on their responses to refer to later.

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR MEDIA GATEKEEPER INTERVIEWS

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. I am involved in a coalition that is participating in the HEALing Communities Study in [State]. We will be working with a number of organizations and groups in [name of community] to reduce the number of opioid overdose deaths over the next two years. I can provide you with more information about the study as a follow up to this meeting if you like.

We are, among other things, planning information and education efforts over the next two years. We'd like to get a better understanding from your perspective of what the issues are in covering the opioid issue—overdose deaths, treatment, and naloxone or Narcan—and what we might do to help you in your efforts to provide such coverage.

Because this is a research project, we want to document that people we talk to about the project have been properly informed about the nature of our questions and give their explicit permission for us to ask these questions and take notes about their answers. Were you able to review the informed consent release I sent you, and could I have a copy of your signed permission now before we start?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What aspects of the opioid crisis do you think have been well-covered by the media in your community?
2. What aspects of the opioid crisis do you think have been missing or under-reported and are not being talked about?

- a. [If not addressed in initial response, ask more about any of these topics: prevention, how to get help, treatment/recovery, naloxone/Narcan, stigma.]
3. What are the challenges to more in-depth coverage of [whatever topics were seen as problematic]?
 - a. **Probe:** Community attitudes? What are they? Who are key opponents? How much support do they have and from whom?
 - b. **Probe:** What information, interview or story opportunities, and special events might be useful and appealing to you in developing such coverage?
 - c. **Follow-up probe:** Is there anything we should know about when we need to get you materials in terms of deadlines and your schedules? Other words to the wise you'd suggest?
4. From your perspective, how important is media coverage of the opioid crisis and opioid overdose deaths in your community in comparison with other aspects of health and people's welfare?
 - a. **Probe:** If other health issues are as/more important, what are they, and why are they relatively as/more important?
5. What issue do you think is most important to address for reducing opioid overdose deaths in this community?

- a. *Probe these if not mentioned in initial response:* Reducing the number of people who become addicted to opioids, increasing the number of people who seek treatment if they think they may be addicted to opioids, increasing the number of providers and treatment facilities for people with an opioid use disorder.
6. Is there anything else you think we should know or other requests you'd have from the HEALing Communities coalition to support your coverage on this issue?

7. Could you give me an idea of the demographics or other characteristics of your readers, viewers, or listeners?

That's all the questions I have at this time. Do you have any questions or other thoughts that occurred to you during our conversation that I didn't ask about?

Thank you for your time. Would you like me to follow up with you by sending more information about the HEALing Communities Study? Would it be okay if I contact you as we start developing the campaigns I mentioned to you earlier?

STEP 3: IMPLEMENT

- Conduct 3-12 interviews.**
- Send thank you notes and continue to maintain a relationship with your contacts.**
- Regularly pitch stories to media contacts.**
- Maintain a media contact list and document your progress.**

FOLLOW-UP AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Following the interviews, make sure to send thank you notes and continue to maintain a relationship with these contacts. Follow them on social media, regularly engage with their content, and comment on their stories to help them recognize your name and show your interest in what they are writing. Follow up as soon as you can on any suggestions or requests that they made during the interview with the HCS communication team, who should include your community engagement facilitator, communications champion, and other coalition members as needed.

PITCH STORIES TO MEDIA CONTACTS REGULARLY

Develop a reputation as an authoritative resource for journalists by regularly delivering concise, credible, and timely information. Reach out to journalists on your contact list to pitch stories that include a news hook that is well-timed and highlights something new about the issue. Follow these tips when pitching a story:

1. **PERSONALIZE YOUR PITCH:** Try not to use the same pitch for every media outlet. Refer to the information you gathered about each journalist and customize the story based on their interests and audience. Find out their specific contact preferences and schedule to ensure you reach them when they are sourcing stories rather than when they are on deadline.
2. **PROVIDE PRE-PREPARED RESOURCES:** Think about the topic and what resources the journalist might need beforehand. Offer fact sheets, graphics/visual aids, soundbite quotes, and other helpful information. Anticipate a lack of technical familiarity with your issue and provide clear definitions and distinctions. Make it easy for them to find information and write their story. For example, they may not want to click through links and read long reports and scientific publications.
3. **SUBMIT ORIGINAL CONTENT:** One way to get your story featured is by submitting original content written by a community stakeholder, like an op-ed, letter to the editor, or guest article. To help with this, we will provide monthly op-ed/letter to the editor templates that your coalition can use and adapt (see Play 3: How to Pitch, Place, and Leverage an Op-Ed for more details).

4. **OFFER SPOKESPEOPLE:** Ask credible subject-matter experts and people with lived experience who are members of your coalition, or known by someone on your coalition, if they would be willing to act as media spokespersons who can participate in interviews to provide personal accounts of the impact of the opioid crisis in the community and what is being done to address it. Offer to connect journalists with these spokespersons and schedule interviews as needed.
5. **BE AVAILABLE AND FOLLOW UP:** Try to be readily accessible when journalists contact you for background, to schedule interviews, and to fact check stories. Return their calls and emails in a timely manner and be willing to drop other things if necessary. If they do publish your story, make sure to follow up with a thank you note to express your appreciation.

MAINTAIN A MEDIA CONTACT LIST AND TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

As you conduct media gatekeeper interviews, maintain a media contact list or spreadsheet with each journalists' name, affiliation, contact information, topics they cover, and links to their relevant articles. This list will need to be updated periodically as contacts are added and media staff change positions.

As your media contacts start to run stories about HCS activities, track and monitor the media coverage in the spreadsheet. Document the link to the story, the author, the outlet, and the number of people that follow or subscribe to that outlet. The number of subscribers/followers can sometimes be found on an outlet's website, or you can reach out to the journalist who authored the piece to ask how many people the story reached.

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

-Margaret J. Wheatley

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [NIDA Media Guide for Journalists](#)
- [CDC Media Access Guide: A Resource for Community Health Promotion](#)
- [CDC Media Outreach Guide: Protect the Ones You Love](#)