



Moving State Policy Reform Using All the Tools in the Toolbox Maine's Environmental Health Strategy Center

As the Beldon Fund's Human Health and Environment strategy took shape, one of the key questions it faced was how to help environmental advocates reframe environmental policy reform so it appealed to a broader public. In 2002, Beldon began formulating an answer, using Maine as a testing ground for a state-based funding strategy that sought to use "all the tools in the toolbox" to reframe the public debate of government regulation of toxic chemicals. This case story examines how Beldon, and its colleague funders (in particular, the John Merck Fund), supported Maine's Environmental Health Strategy Center (EHSC) and used science-based issue advocacy, nonpartisan civic engagement, and message framing to broaden support for state regulatory reform.

Fusing Health and the Environment

As the Beldon Fund became more engaged in funding state-level environmental advocacy, foundation leaders realized that they needed to help advocates develop new approaches to state-level policy reform. Historically, environmental advocates framed their calls for reform based on harm to the environment, but there was often little effort to reach beyond conventional ideological or cultural boundaries. "If you were an environmental advocacy organization, you were probably not reaching out to groups that don't think or act like you," said Bill Roberts, Beldon's executive director at the time. Roberts and his colleagues at Beldon felt that environmental advocates needed to broaden the public appeal of environmental policy reform. And to do that, advocates needed to develop new messages, and cultivate new messengers and approaches.

In 2002, Beldon began supporting the Environmental Health Strategy Center (EHSC), whose mission is to promote human health, safer chemicals and a sustainable economy. EHSC executive director Mike Belliveau shared Beldon's interest in creating a new approach to environmental advocacy. By framing chemical policy as a public health issue, Belliveau's goal was to fundamentally change chemical policy in Maine by expanding the public support for reform. "We saw this as a great opportunity to broaden the constituency for environmental and policy reform by bringing in health-related constituents," said Anita Nager, Beldon's executive director. Over the next six years, Beldon would commit grants totaling more than \$600,000 to help EHSC pursue its multi-pronged reform strategy.

Building a Coalition for Reform: The Alliance for a Clean and Healthy Maine

Under Belliveau's leadership, EHSC began putting together a broad coalition to work on issues at the nexus of health and chemicals policy. The chief vehicle was the Alliance for a Clean and Healthy Maine, which was housed, staffed, and led by EHSC. Today, the Alliance comprises eleven partners and forty endorsing organizations, including environmental, health professionals and health affected groups, progressive business, labor, faith, and women's groups. Among its major partners were the Maine Conservation Voters Education Fund and the Maine Women's Policy Center, which collaborated with EHSC, with additional Beldon support, on a nonpartisan civic engagement project to identify and mobilize suburban women in the Portland area to educate policymakers about environmental health concerns.

The breadth of the Alliance and the depth of its members' commitment have been the twin pillars of the coalition's success. Each organization is responsible for educating and activating their memberships and supporters, encouraging them to weigh in on key issues. During a campaign to ban toxic flame-retardants, for instance, firefighters stepped into the fray, weighing in on the side of the Alliance. "This was something that made a strong impression on those who watched the battle unfold," said Belliveau. "It was striking, because the firefighters were such an unusual and unexpected ally, and because they were central players in the substance of the debate. These were the people who were running into burning buildings in uniforms soaked with toxic chemicals."

In several instances, the Alliance was able to mobilize unlikely bedfellows to weigh in on the same side of an issue. For instance, during the Kid's Safe campaign, which sought to underscore the right to healthy birth outcomes, representatives from Planned Parenthood testified at legislative hearings side-by-side with representatives from the Roman Catholic Diocese about the dangers toxic chemicals posed to pregnant mothers, fetuses, and newborns. The very fact that these two groups were seated at the same table together caught observers by surprise, underscoring the breadth of support for reform.

"One of the lessons for funders here is that you have to be open to funding a lot of stuff that may not fit squarely with your core issues," Roberts explained. "The public health frame was the anchor for public engagement and messaging; the civic engagement infrastructure allowed Alliance members to put boots on the ground and deliver that message to the public and public officials."

Campaigning to Win: The Stepping Stone Strategy

The Alliance was extremely deliberate in its campaign work, developing a multiyear, multi-pronged strategy. The goal was to ensure that the coalition had a winnable campaign each year, and that each victory positioned them for the next battle. Early wins on phasing out mercury from products and banning disposal of products containing mercury laid the groundwork for successful campaigns to ban arsenic-based pesticides in wood and to require paint manufacturers to pay for lead poisoning prevention programs. These victories led to a ban of the toxic flame retardant deca-BDE—and culminated in a comprehensive Kids Safe Product Act, which garnered near-unanimous support in the Maine legislature when the bill passed in April 2008. This law, which requires manufacturers to disclose priority chemicals in consumer products and empowers the state to require safer alternatives, represents the most advanced chemical policy reform ever adopted at the state level.

The Alliance also made sure that every step in each campaign was grounded in firm science. In previous campaigns without a health frame, advocates often focused on the *environmental* impact of chemicals on fish and other natural resources. EHSC built its strategy around the impact of chemicals on *people*, and made it real in a way that many other efforts had not yet achieved. For example, by testing the levels of pollution in 13 citizens in the state, the Alliance was able to demonstrate the ubiquity of chemicals in our homes and everyday products. This became a powerful tool for recruiting legislative and community allies, underscoring how chemicals affect everyone, regardless of age, occupation, class, or political leaning.

If highlighting the human impact of chemical pollution was the stick, EHSC also sought to create carrots—solutions and policy proscriptions that would be palatable to the business community. Rather than just relying on rhetoric about a green economy, the Alliance supported state investment in 'green chemistry' research and development and began promoting a project to convert potatoes into biodegradable, nontoxic plastic, demonstrating how the latest science could help build Maine's economic future. This project appealed to business interests and Maine's congressional delegation alike. Said Belliveau: "When we

reframed the issue as a health issue, we became a serious contender. But when we evolved the frame to say that the solution to the problem is an economic development strategy, that helped push us over the top. Politically, that has made the difference.”

Using all the Tools to Influence State Policies: Lessons Learned

- **Strong Leadership is Key:** Mike Belliveau is widely credited with the Alliance’s success. His experience as an advocate in California taught him valuable lessons about leadership, coalition building, and strategy. His guiding principle as a coalition leader was simple: “Just because you built it, doesn’t mean you own it.” Belliveau also had a remarkable ability to command respect from people who do not see eye-to-eye—an essential quality for any coalition leader.
- **Pick the Right Fight:** By focusing on the human health impact of toxic chemicals, the Alliance found an issue that was tough to oppose. After all, what legislator would want to vote against a bill protecting kids and pregnant mothers from toxins? In every campaign, safer alternatives were prominently featured as a positive solution, giving hope to activists and reassurance to policy makers.
- **Maintain a Healthy Coalition:** The Alliance included a broad cross-section of groups, reflecting a diverse set of interests. The Alliance shared credit among its members and matched members strengths and capacity to specific work plans. Just as important, the Alliance has a culture of discipline and accountability. Its members each brought something of value to the effort.
- **Choose the Right Frame:** The Alliance has been masterful at framing the issues in a way that appeals directly to the audience they are trying to reach. For women, the message was about protecting children; for business, it was about the economy; and for legislators, it was about protecting constituents from out-of-state companies selling their toxic products in Maine—and sticking taxpayers and state-funded health programs with the resulting medical bills.
- **Be Pragmatic:** The Alliance has understood the value of declaring victory, even if significant compromises need to be made. This has enabled them to maintain momentum and build a track record of success.