



Oregon School-Based
Health Care Network

Tips for writing and placing Op-Ed's and Letters to the Editor

Make it short, specific, and localized

- Look for story gaps that you can fill with a point about SBHC. For example, there is a story about your town being voted the healthiest in your state — but there is no mention of your excellent SBHC system and the vital role it played in making your town the healthiest. This is an excellent opportunity for a “great story, but there’s an important gap” letter to the editor.
- Focus on one point in letters to the editor, no more than three in an OpEd.
- Make it a personal story if possible — but also include in your OpEds examples of how systemic change can help an entire group of people in similar situations as the person in the story. For example, the moving story of teenager Joe Smith who received vital treatment from his SBHC for diabetes. The story itself is powerful, but the public focus could be completely on Joe and not on all the Joes across the nation. To make the story have real impact — to help all the Joes — we need to make the point that by investing in SBHC, we can help thousands of teens like Joe. That’s why it’s vital to support federal legislation to fund SBHC, etc.
- Use accurate facts to back up your opinions — and double check to make sure that they are accurate.
- Use simple and straight forward language.
- Avoid jargon, acronyms, and other technical words.
- It’s OK to ask for action from elected officials — they read these letters daily to keep their fingers on the pulse of their constituents.

Know your newspaper

It is important to closely monitor your local paper. Think about the content and — perhaps more importantly — the content gaps. Read the editorial page everyday. You will start to notice a pattern: the typical length of published letters/OpEds, a favored style, who gets published regularly, an on-going topic, etc. By getting to know the “feel” of the page, you have a much better chance of writing a letter/OpEd that is going to get published.

Know your contact

The editorial page editor of your local newspaper is the person you have to contact, engage, and persuade to publish your letter/OpEd. You can find their name by calling the newspaper or checking out their website. On the web or back page of the paper, you can often discover other valuable information about what the editor is looking for: length, delivery method (email vs. snail mail etc.). If you’re not sure, call them and ask.

Who signs the letter/OpEd

From getting to know your newspaper's letter page, determine who should be named as author of the letter/OpEd. It can be a variety of people depending on the goals of your campaign and needs of your organization. But it should be the person who gives your letter/OpEd the best chance for publication. You can ask a local official, community leader, clergy person, organizational head, student, parent, etc.

Submitting a Letter/OpEd

- Write "For Publication" at the top of your letter/OpEd and mail/email it to the editorial page editor.
- Make sure to include your name, address, and daytime phone number — the editor often likes to confirm that the letter/OpEd was written by the person named.

Follow up

Call the editorial page editor the day after your submission to make sure that they received it. Ask them if they have had the opportunity to review the letter: if they haven't, ask them when they think they will have time to do so. If they have, are they thinking about publishing it? If they say "no", politely ask them for feedback. You will want to learn how to do a "better job" the next time. If they say "yes", then you will want to say "thanks." You may want to follow-up again.

Acknowledgements

Be sure to send a "thank you" to the author of your OpEd. Also it is strategic to share the OpEd with targeted elected officials, school administration, and current & potential funders. It is important to tell your key stakeholders about the work you are producing — especially if the director of your organization is not a co-author.

Further Exposure

Letters to the editor: Initiate a letter writing campaign. Get your allies to write letters talking about SBHCs. The more letters and OpEds a paper gets the more likely they are to continue covering the issue. Once you have made it a hot topic and a community issue, candidates will pay attention and have to make public statements regarding SBHCs.

OpEds: If you get an OpEd published, post it on your organizational website. This will not only bring added kudos to your organization, it will give others an opportunity to see what types of periodicals are printing specific stories.

Adapted from the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care's Organized for Impact

Sample letter to the editor

School-based health centers can step to forefront

April 15, 2006

As Massachusetts plans for a possible bird flu outbreak, encouraging schools to prepare for such a pandemic is forward thinking ("Schools draft plans for avian flu," Page A1, April 10).

However, officials must not forget the role of the state's 49 school-based health centers, which care for thousands of schoolchildren, many of them poor, uninsured, and lacking other primary care.

School-based health centers, sponsored by community health centers, hospitals, and local public health departments, and staffed by skilled nurse practitioners authorized to prescribe medicine, are poised to help cities and towns prepare for a flu crisis and support prevention measures.

The state Department of Public Health licenses the centers, which means there is a built-in line of communication between state and local officials.

Also, part of a nurse practitioner's core role is teaching prevention. During medical appointments and in classrooms, we constantly remind children to cough into their sleeves, wash their hands frequently, and take other important precautions.

Excluding school-based health centers from the community planning process would be squandering a valuable resource.

ERNIA P. HUGHES, Executive Director Massachusetts Coalition of School-Based Health Centers, Boston ■

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Sample Op-ed:

Access to care is key to healthy kids (published in The Oregonian)

As a single, working parent of two teenagers, I count on everything running smoothly. When one of my kids gets sick or injured (they both play sports), their school life and my work life are thrown into chaos. That's why the health of my family and thousands of other Oregon families depends on access to quality health care.

Access to care is more than just having insurance. Insurance does not guarantee a child will receive appropriate care. Insurance does not promise that parents will be able to leave work to take their kids to a doctor or be able to afford the co-payment. And, with 117,000 uninsured children in our state, getting all kids covered is not going to happen overnight.

At a time when public dollars are strained and health care needs are soaring, it is imperative that we invest in systems that are working.

So what can we do today? We can support delivery models that provide affordable, quality health care in community settings. One such model is the system of 45 certified school-based health centers across the state, including 14 in the Portland Metro area. In Oregon, nearly 18,000 elementary, middle and high school students were served by these centers in 2004-05, more than half of whom had no health insurance.

School-based health centers deliver professional health care (physical, mental and preventive) to children where they are – in the schools. They serve all children – the insured, the underinsured and the uninsured. The care is developmentally appropriate, something that is especially important when working with adolescents to avert drug and alcohol use that can lead to larger problems down the line.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of school-based health centers in Oregon. This week, Portland is host to the National School-Based Health Care Convention. Hundreds of school-based health professionals from around the country are coming to our state to learn about our successes, as well as delve into such critical topics as mental health services, obesity prevention and sustainable funding strategies.

Governor Kulongoski will be on hand to open the convention. He has been a proponent of school-based health centers as one way to provide access to health care. He and his staff have visited several centers and have worked diligently to understand how to grow and sustain this health care delivery model.

One of the few victories for children in the 2005 legislature was an additional investment of \$500,000 for school-based health centers statewide. This increased funding allowed the state to leverage local resources to support the creation of centers in five new counties. The Governor's leadership has helped to put Oregon front and center in the national school-based health care movement.

We believe Oregon should be a place where all children thrive. Access to health care, as a critical element of supporting the health of our children, must be a top priority for elected leaders. School-based health centers are one cost-effective solution that makes good sense.

Robin Christian is the executive director of Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit organization that educates and engages Oregonians to get results for kids. For more information, go to www.childrenfirstfororegon.org.