

Speak Up , Speak Out Workshop

A Workshop on Taking Action to Improve Seniors' Quality of Life

Background

The purpose of this workshop is to familiarize participants with some of the methods they can use to influence government policy and public opinion. The workshop is about two hours long. The outline that follows is generic. Change it and adapt it as appropriate for the audience and the time available. The maximum audience for the workshop is 20 people. The workshop features some small group work which becomes too time-consuming with an audience larger than 20.

Resources Needed – One copy of *Speak Up, Speak Out* for each participant.

Presentation

Opening and Introductions [10 Minutes]

Good morning (afternoon, evening). My name is _____. I'm a member of the Seniors' Quality of Life Project Coordinating Committee. The Seniors' Quality of Life Project is a Canada-wide project funded by Health Canada. In Saskatchewan, the project is being managed by the seniors' Education Centre at the University of Regina. During the course of this project we looked at factors that influence seniors' quality of life. Some of these are within the control of the individual. For example, we can control the quality of our health to a certain extent, by not smoking, by eating right and by exercising. However, some other factors that influence seniors' quality of life depend on government policy. For example, the amount we pay for drugs is a matter of government policy. Continuation of the Old Age Security Program and the Canada Pension Plan that so many of us depend on, is a matter of government policy.

Our workshop today is about ways that we, as seniors, can influence government policy so that government decisions and programs enhance seniors' quality of life.

Before we go any further, I'd like to take a few minutes for introductions. *[Ask each participant to introduce themselves. You can skip these introductions if you are sure that everyone in the audience knows each other.]*

*[Hand out copies of **Speak Up, Speak Out** to each participant.]*

This booklet *Speak Up, Speak Out* contains lots of ideas for actions that we can take to influence government policy. We'll be covering a few of them in this workshop today. Because of time limitations, we won't be covering everything in this booklet, so I encourage you to read the booklet all the way through later on.

Vote in Every Election [5 Minutes]

The most basic way that you can influence the political process is by voting. You are entitled to vote in every health board, municipal, provincial and federal election. Make your vote count. When political candidates come to your door, ask them what their position is on issues that concern you. If they are strong on seniors' issues tell them that you are pleased they are so responsive to seniors. If they don't seem interested in seniors' issues, tell them they won't be getting your vote.

Seniors are an increasingly large proportion of the population. In 1996, we were about 14.5 percent of Saskatchewan's population and the percentage of seniors will rise in the years ahead. We are a group with significant political impact.

Work for the Political Candidate of Your Choice [5 Minutes]

Another basic way to influence public policy is to work for the political candidate of your choice. Next election, if there's a candidate who is particularly strong on seniors' issues, consider working for that candidate. Political candidates always need people to do things like clerical work, putting up and taking down posters and lawn signs, and phoning and going door-to-door for the candidate.

Many seniors are retired and have a great deal of time and energy to contribute. Most candidates would welcome your help with their political campaign. If you decide to work for a particular candidate, make sure the candidate knows that you are involved because he or she has a good position on seniors' issues.

Writing Letters [40 Minutes]

Writing letters to elected officials is an important way of advocating for change. Elected officials often assess the importance of an issue by the number of letters and phone calls they get about the issue, so numbers count.

[Ask participants to divide into groups of 4-6 people. Tell each group to:

- *Pick an issue that is of concern to them and other seniors. Examples of issues include: the high cost of drugs, the quality of home care, fears that the Old Age Security Program or Canada Pension Plan will be cut back or eliminated, inaccessible public buildings.*
- *Spend about 8 minutes identifying key points they would make in a letter about their issue.*
- *Spend about 8 minutes identifying who they could write to, to express their concern about the issue.*

Allow 20-25 minutes for group work. At the end of this time, ask one representative from each group to report back to the whole audience. Tell participants that each group representative has a maximum of 5 minutes. They should tell the whole audience:

- *the issue their group was working on;*
- *the key points that can be made about this issue; and,*
- *who they would write to, to express concern about this issue.*

Reporting back will probably take 20-25 minutes.]

Thank you very much everyone for your participation in this activity. Remember, when you write letters, keep them short, polite and to the point. Long, rambling letters often aren't read all the way through and an angry or disrespectful letter diminishes your credibility.

Using the Telephone [5 Minutes]

Letter writing is one way to let elected officials know what you think. You can also use the telephone for the same purpose. When you phone an elected official, plan beforehand what you are going to say, so that your comments are short and to the point. It's best to give your name, briefly describe your concern and be specific about what you want the elected official to do.

When you call, the phone will usually be answered by a secretary or assistant. If the elected official isn't available to talk to you, tell the person who answered the phone about your concern and ask that the elected official return your call. With phone calls, as with letters, numbers count, so be sure to ask all your family, friends and neighbours to call also.

Using the Media [5 Minutes]

Newspapers, television and radio are very important tools for influencing public opinion and thus government decisions.

Whatever the issue you are addressing, you'll need a news release. A news release describes the issue, tells why it is of concern and outlines actions that government or the public can take. More detailed information about preparing a news release appears in *Speak Up, Speak Out*. Send your news release to the local newspaper, radio and television stations. It's best to send it to a specific individual.

Whenever possible, send it to an editor, rather than a reporter. Editors decide what will be covered and assign specific stories to individual reporters.

Your news release may appear “as is” in a newspaper, or someone may call you for more information or for an interview.

If your news release hasn't been used in a week or 10 days, follow up with a phone call. Offer to provide more information or do an interview. Your objective should always be to get an interview. If you are talking to a newspaper reporter, the interview allows you to discuss your issue in more detail. If you are talking to a radio or television reporter, the interview provides a sound bite that will appear on radio or TV and thus reach many people.

Building Networks [30 Minutes]

We as individuals can make a difference, but there is strength in numbers. When we build communication networks and lobby government there is great potential for change. Here are some ideas for building communication networks:

- Tell your friends and family about your concerns – ask them to phone or write letters.
- Set up phone trees. Each person on the phone tree is responsible for phoning three or four others to pass along information.
- In seniors' complexes, appoint building or floor captains to distribute information and organize individuals to write letters and phone elected officials.
- Use networks that already exist like community groups, service clubs and seniors' groups. Make a presentation to these groups and ask them to write letters or phone elected officials.

[Ask participants to get into the same groups they were in before. Ask them to:

- *Work with the same issue they identified earlier in this workshop.*
- *Spend about 20 minutes planning a communication network they could use to distribute information about this issue and to encourage people to write and phone elected officials.*

If time permits, ask a representative from each group to report back to the entire audience and to describe the communication network their group planned. This will probably only be possible if the workshop is longer than two hours.]

Conclusion and Discussion [15 Minutes]

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you today. It's been a pleasure. I'd now be pleased to answer any questions you might have.