



PUBLIC HEALTH AUTHORITY
Fact Sheet

Types of Legal and Policy Tools to Protect Community Health at the Local Level: A Brief Introduction

Introduction

According to the [2024 Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey \(PH WINS\)](#), policy engagement is one of the top training needs of the public health workforce. Knowledge of legal and policy tools that may be used to advance public health at the local level can increase the effectiveness of public health practitioners and community advocates in bringing about lasting systems change. Local ordinances that either require or prohibit specific behaviors may be the most obvious legal tool to advance public health and health equity. Yet if local policymakers are not open to adopting a new ordinance to advance public health and health equity, other law and policy tools may help to inform the public and begin to create a constituency for collective action. Awareness of the full range of law and policy interventions available to policymakers can suggest stepping stones to move toward a deeper policy change than may be possible in the short term.

Command of a variety of tools available to advance public health at the local level may increase the flexibility and effectiveness of local elected officials, public health practitioners, and community advocates, particularly where the political climate disfavors local regulatory action or where funding is uncertain. Perhaps especially at the local level, laws and policies may contribute to policy, systems, and environmental change in a variety of ways. They may (1) regulate businesses and individuals, (2) empower local government officials to act, (3) seek to express a governmental point of view, (4) seek to build public understanding and support of governmental priorities, or (5) create agreements among local governments, or between local governments and private parties.

This fact sheet provides descriptions in plain language of a number of legal and policy tools commonly used at the local level, together with one or more examples of how they might be used to advance public health and health equity.



Ordinance

Meaning

An ordinance is a rule established by the governing body (such as a city council or county board). Similar to a statute at the state level, it is enacted according to procedural rules set forth in state and local law. In some cases, there may be shared state and local authority. Frequently, an ordinance includes an enforcement mechanism, such as through civil fines or criminal prosecution. Ordinances may include incentives to encourage behavior, rather than require it. Ordinances are often collected and posted in the form of a “code” on the city or county website. [American Legal Publishing](#) posts municipal codes for large cities on its website.

Examples Relevant to Public Health

Ordinances may be the most well-known legal mechanism at the local level. There are many relevant examples. They include restaurant inspection ordinances, zoning ordinances, public nuisance ordinances, building codes and building performance standards, cooling ordinances, and community benefit ordinances.

Emergency Order

Meaning

An order issued by a member of the executive branch (Governor, Director of State Department of Health, Health Department Director, City Mayor, County Board Chair) in the context of an emergency or disaster

Examples Relevant to Public Health

Examples of emergency orders relevant to public health include evacuation orders, and orders to control the spread of vector-borne or infectious disease.

Policy

Meaning

Policies set forth general principles and goals that guide a governmental entity. People sometimes refer to “little ‘p’ policy” and “big ‘P’ policy” to distinguish between more general goals and preferences and more specific laws. Policies may also be used to address details and fill in the gaps where laws do not address or anticipate questions related to implementation. Public health policies should be evidence-based.

Examples Relevant to Public Health

Policies relevant to public health may include smoke-free indoor air policies, Complete Streets policies, community health improvement plans, hazard mitigation plans, climate action plans, and plans to restore the urban tree canopy.

Resolution

Meaning

A statement of the opinion or intention of a legislative body, such as a city council or county board. The subject may be one which would be difficult to address in an ordinance. It may set forth an intended course of action.



An ordinance or order may accompany a resolution or be issued later to authorize or require action and fill in details. A resolution may also be a motion or formal proposition offered for adoption by a legislative body.

Examples Relevant to Public Health

An example of a resolution relevant to public health might be a resolution approving the issuance, continuation, or termination of an executive order. Another example might be a resolution announcing the beginning of a process to develop a climate action plan.

Declaration

Meaning

A formal statement, often related to principles and beliefs or observed facts and circumstances. It may, but need not, set forth an intended course of action. A declaration may be accompanied by a separate document, such as an executive order. A declaration may be a condition for the ability to access certain government funds at the local, state, or federal level.

Examples Relevant to Public Health

Declarations relevant to public health include declarations of racism as a public health crisis, declarations of a natural disaster, and declarations of a public health emergency.

Proclamation

Meaning

A formal public announcement.

Examples Relevant to Public Health

An example of a proclamation relevant to public health might include a proclamation of World AIDS Day, a proclamation of National Public Health Week, or a proclamation of Earth Day.

Contract

Meaning

An agreement between two or more parties creating obligations that are enforceable or otherwise recognized under the law

Examples Relevant to Public Health

An example of a contract relevant to public health would include a contract to procure food, food services, equipment, building materials, or vehicles. It might also include a contract with a private entity to provide recycling or composting services.



Memorandum of Understanding/ Memorandum of Agreement

Meaning

Two or more parties express mutual agreement and set forth roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the parties. The parties may or may not intend for the agreement to be binding and legally enforceable.

Examples Relevant to Public Health

Examples of memoranda of understanding or memoranda of agreement include mutual aid agreements for coordinated emergency response, a shared service agreement entered into by 2 or more health departments, and agreements between a local health department and a nonprofit hospital or health care system to collaborate on a community health needs assessment.

Conclusion

A basic familiarity with each of these types of law and policy tools at the local level will likely enhance the confidence, adaptability, and effectiveness of local public health practitioners and community advocates at any stage of their career. One well-known source of evidence-based policies for the local level is [City Health](#).

June 2025

This document was developed by Jill Krueger, J.D., Director, Climate and Health, Network for Public Health Law. The Network promotes public health and health equity through non-partisan educational resources and technical assistance. These materials provided are provided solely for educational purposes and do not constitute legal advice. The Network's provision of these materials does not create an attorney-client relationship with you or any other person and is subject to the [Network's Disclaimer](#).

Support for the Network provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

