

**19
08**

POLICY CONVERSATION SUMMARY



**BEYOND THE TALK
& GETTING TO ACTION**

POLICY CONVERSATION: BEYOND THE TALK & GETTING TO ACTION

Summary of Michelle Baldwin's Presentation:

LET'S ENGAGE EACH OTHER IN POLICY CONVERSATIONS

Pillar recognizes that one of the strengths of the nonprofit sector is our ability to collaborate and share best-practices. Accordingly, it is important that we hold space for our members to discuss policy so they can develop tools, partnerships, and strategies that will help further their missions.

Our first Policy Conversation was hosted by Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), Pillar Nonprofit Network, United Way Elgin-Middlesex, and London Community Foundation on June 18, 2019. At that event we discussed the current climate of uncertainty created by the 2019 Budget and Expenditure Estimates and heard how organizations can engage in policy development and advocacy efforts.

This second Policy Conversation was created as a follow-up discussion so we could start to learn from one another. (See below for a summary of the insights shared by participants.) But this dialogue isn't limited to one event; we can take our conversation online. Pillar members are encouraged to seek advice, share expertise, and exchange ideas with like minded organizations in Pillar's online community at forum.pillar nonprofit.ca. We can also track everyone's input on social media using the hashtag #PolicyTalk, and connect to provincial movements using ONN's #NonprofitsAdvocate.

Additionally, a third Policy Conversation has been planned for September 30, 2019. Andrew Chunilall, CEO of Community Foundations of Canada, will join us to discuss [Future Forward Thinking](#) and explore the trends and shifts we need to be paying attention to as a community as well as the actions we can take to prepare for these anticipated changes.

LET'S SHARE INFORMATION & RESOURCES

Michelle participated in [The Maytree Policy School](#) in order to advance her knowledge of evidence-informed policy solutions and found a lot of value in immersing herself in this field and learning from its experts. In the spirit of sharing, she recounted her top takeaways (below) and explained the value of [developing a Public Policy Strategy](#).

Creating this tool requires organizations to consider where they sit on the continuum from activism to advocacy and to determine who will be responsible for which tasks. By going through the process, organizations will reflect on available resources, key partners, and desired outcomes and metrics. [Pillar's Public Policy Strategy](#) is a living document that could shift focus in order to respond to the changing needs of our community, but having this strategy in place provides a solid foundation to build upon so we can be responsive rather than reactive.

TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS AND ACTIONS FROM MAYTREE POLICY SCHOOL

- 1. Think Cross-partisan, rather than Nonpartisan**
Working across all parties and connecting with them early in our advocacy efforts, reflects an approach rooted in engagement, partnership and action.
- 2. Start with Questions and Be Solutions Focused**
Asking questions before producing answers leads to better solutions. Collecting and analyzing data, assessing a range of policy options, and pausing to consider whether we are creating any unintended consequences and ripple effects with our policy proposals is critical to successful and sustainable systems change.
- 3. Harness the Power of Networks**
Networks have the power to test and build consensus and to broker solutions.
- 4. Establish Cross-sector Partnerships**
Establishing trust and practicing radical empathy are key factors in creating enduring and effective collaborations, so be ruthless when making decisions about which partners fit your public policy strategy; your success depends on how effectively you work together.
- 5. Embrace Radical Optimism**
When we bring forward policy we should offer proof of possibility and share an aspirational endgame, including more allies, more resources, more support.
- 6. Value the Many, and Not the One**
To build better movements around policy we should put value in the many and cultivate leadership at all levels.
- 7. Engage Those with Lived Experience**
Having a participatory process is crucial to developing policies that are based on true needs rather than assumptions.
- 8. Understand the Value of Social Research and Development (Social R&D)**
Investment in research and development is critical for achieving our objectives. Research results are a far greater tool for persuading government than relying on anecdotal observations.
- 9. Communicate Your Story**
Practicing radical empathy and putting yourself in the shoes of the “other” to understand their thinking and perspective can help you adjust your language to resonate with your audience so you can change minds and hearts.
- 10. Appreciate Relentless Incrementalism**
Public policy takes time and requires patience and tenacity.

Insights from Table Discussions

Participants shared recommendations related to the following topics:

- Public Policy Strategy
- Government Relations
- Communications

PUBLIC POLICY STRATEGY

- **Gain Clarity and Manage Expectations**
Developing a Public Policy Strategy can help your organization define its policy personality and get clear on what activities you are willing to take on. Setting a strategy also helps define boundaries by acknowledging limitations and naming what your organization doesn't do. For example, your ability to speak out might be determined by your organization's reliance on government funding.
- **Distribute Leadership to Share Relationship Management Responsibilities**
Maintaining relationships requires a lot of intentionality and care. A lot of work goes into preparing for, and following up after, each meeting. It's helpful to get Board members and the staff team involved so relationships are held by the organization rather than one or two individuals. Relationships should be ongoing; not only called upon when you need something.
- **Welcome Diverse Perspectives**
Policy committees should have a balance of opinions at the table. This is where advocacy comes in. Lookout for potential blindspots (e.g. focusing on the big issues might lead to missing the small roadblocks). Consider who the policy will affect. Bring in voices that speak to different perspectives (e.g. economic, social, environmental). How will each contribute? What challenges and strengths do they bring? How are they connected? (Consider using the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals as a unifying tool.) How you write your policy initially can determine whether people show up, or even know about it, so leave things open enough for people to see themselves in the policy.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

- **Know the Decision-Makers**
You don't want to spend your time advocating to people who won't be able to move your proposal forward. When developing your policy proposal, find out who is able to make the decision and which avenues will get your message to them.
- **Understand How the Mechanisms Work**
Sometimes politicians unfamiliar with protocol and procedures might promise or threaten to make changes they don't have the authority to make. Familiarizing yourself with the regulations can let you know when to save your energy and when to rally your supporters. Additionally, knowing when the process requires stakeholder engagement can put nonprofit organizations in a position to negotiate access. Some organizations

might walk away from an unbalanced table and demand more equal representation, knowing the organizers are likely to comply because they can't move forward without a key stakeholder. Others caution against shutting down conversation for fear of getting locked out, and advise sitting at even an unbalanced table in order to be called in for future discussions. Your organization's Public Policy Strategy can help guide your actions and response.

- **Don't Be Afraid to Dive In**

We learn a lot through trial and error. When you find out key information after-the-fact, reflect on your failures and take note of what's worked and what hasn't. Even when we make mistakes there's value in putting yourself out there to broadcast your organization's value.

- **Seize the Opportunity**

A new government assuming power provides organizations with a chance to change the conversation with new people around the table. Be bold and ask for invitations for yourself and for others who might be missing from the conversation.

- **Be Patient**

Our organizations can outlast every government; eventually we will find one that is sympathetic to our message if we are persistent. Share your proposal with administrators who will be able to get it in front of the government that's the right match. It also helps to prepare key messages in anticipation of an opportune moment so you'll have something ready to go if a story gets a lot of play in the media or there's a sudden groundswell of support for a cause connected to your mission. That moment may never come, but luck favours the prepared.

COMMUNICATIONS

- **Share Your Impact & Partner for Greater Impact**

Communicate your organization's results and increase awareness of what you're working on. Harness stories from within your community to provide examples of your organization's impact. These actions will elicit engagement and attract funding, but also encourage partnership opportunities. Powerful things can be done with more partnership, and this will become increasingly important as we take on big, persistent challenges with limited resources. Consider how your mission might intersect with a seemingly unrelated issue (e.g. Connect health advocates to environmental issues, as there is strong alignment between health and environment). Partnerships help to raise the issues in the public consciousness to drive change forward.

- **Speak the Same Language as Your Audience**

Read Government documents and translate your message to use similar terms and match their priorities. Conduct some preliminary research to understand an individual's or organization's values. How has someone voted on key issues? What are the stated goals on the website? What key messages have they shared with the media? Recognize that public officials do want to help; the trick is to identify intersecting interests and be aware of particular challenges and their effects. Right now it might be prudent to speak

about economic drivers and to demonstrate better steerage of funding dollars.

- **Spread Your Message Through Different Pathways**

Deliver messages through internal and external structures when developing or implementing policy. Communicate with partner agencies, clients, frontline workers, anyone who can help get the word out. Maintain a sense of hope and purpose; people are moved to action when there's a chance for success.

- **Getting Public Policy Passed is Not the Final Step**

Policy communication carries a lot of weight. We design policies to have a positive impact, but in order to see that impact we must communicate to the people who will be affected. Engage with your policy targets in clear and effective language and set the context to guide the interpretation of the policy. When you have contributed to the development of a public policy that gets implemented, ensure you are monitoring results in a way that includes feedback from those who will feel the impact of the policy.