

Community Water Fluoridation Brief

Highlights and Lessons Learned from 2014

March 2015

As a public health measure to prevent tooth decay, community water fluoridation (CWF) is noted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as “one of ten great public health achievements of the 20th century.”¹ In 2012, about three-quarters of the U.S. population served by public water systems had access to optimally fluoridated water.² CWF prevents tooth decay by about 25 percent over a person’s lifetime.³ Both proponents and opponents of CWF have actively addressed the issue through targeted campaigns in recent years at the local government level. In 2014, seven out of eight communities successfully voted to retain water fluoridation in their communities.

The DentaQuest Foundation’s mission is to *improve oral health for all*, and water fluoridation is an important community resource that supports oral health. This brief highlights the experiences of a sample of five communities across the country that voted to retain community water fluoridation, and summarizes the key factors that contributed to their successes.

Community Water Fluoridation Victories

Healdsburg, California

Healdsburg has had fluoridated water since 1952, and is the only fluoridated community in Sonoma County, California. In 2014, a local group opposed to fluoridation gathered the necessary signatures to put fluoridation on the county’s November ballot. Individuals active in the county opposing fluoridation were also active in the Healdsburg campaign.



Pop. 11,517



66% voted to retain CWF

Who Got Involved. A team of Healdsburg advocates including community leaders, dentists, physicians, and others received support from the California Dental Association (CDA) to mount a successful campaign. Marjorie Stocks, a fluoridation consultant from the California Dental Association Foundation and Howard Pollick, a professor of dentistry at the University of California San Francisco and a well-known expert on the benefits of CWF, worked closely with community advocates. Notably, the mayor of Healdsburg is a retired dentist who supported water fluoridation in his community.

What Worked. Healdsburg’s efforts to retain CWF received the support from the CDA, who funded a “Save Our Smiles” campaign. The campaign emphasized working with community leaders and developed messaging to emphasize local values. Healdsburg is the quintessential small town with an emphasis on families, and the campaign emphasized those values. The campaign worked with local leaders and local dental and medical professionals to shape messaging, and to educate the public on the benefits of fluoridation. In addition they conducted a campaign that included mailings, phone banking, door-to-door voter education, and outreach to local press. Campaign funds totaled \$45,000.

¹ American Dental Association (<http://www.ada.org/en/public-programs/advocating-for-the-public/fluoride-and-fluoridation>)

² American Dental Association (<http://www.ada.org/en/public-programs/advocating-for-the-public/fluoride-and-fluoridation>)

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/basics/index.htm>

Additionally, Healdsburg benefited from the use of the CDA model for CWF, a model for planning and managing CWF campaigns that has been refined over time in California.⁴ Stocks, who worked on the victory in Healdsburg, attributed the success to a careful campaign, a focus on educating the public, and a focus on learning from the community.

Source: Marjorie Stocks, a fluoridation consultant for the California Dental Association Foundation; Gayle Mathe, Director, Community Programs, California Dental Association



Salina, Kansas

Salina, Kansas has fluoridated their water since 1968. In 2014, anti-fluoridation activists, including one well-known and highly conservative individual, gathered the necessary signatures to put the elimination of community water fluoridation on the city's November ballot. The anti-fluoridation efforts in Salina were inspired and informed by an unsuccessful 2012 campaign to fluoridate the city of Wichita, Kansas.

Who Got Involved. The Salina Dental Society was already on the forefront of this debate. They rallied key advocates such as other local dentists, doctors, and the CEO of the local safety net clinic. The state coalition, Oral Health Kansas, joined the effort with other Topeka-based partners such as the Kansas Dental Association and the state health department's fluoride specialist. Together, these advocates created and funded a campaign called Keep Fluoride.

Oral Health Kansas helped with campaign finance issues. Jane McGinley at the American Dental Association and Matt Jacob at the Children's Dental Health Project helped campaign leaders with the development of talking points. Additionally, the Kansas Dental Association sent a consultant to Salina to conduct a day-long media training with campaign leaders. Dr. Allison Lesko wrote a training program for doctors to use in their offices with their staff which covered the basics of fluoridation. Volunteers who participated in door-to-door campaigning received a "Fluoridation 101" training.

What Worked. Megan Foreman of Oral Health Kansas called the effort in Salina "very much a political one," which required a full-scale issue campaign rather than simply voter education campaign. Keep Fluoride hired a political consultant. Campaign efforts included yard signs, training local health professionals as advocates, social media outreach, phone banking, door-to-door canvassing, TV and radio ads, and the distribution of 5,000 branded Halloween toothbrushes. Foreman described the campaign as very positive, and reported that a crucial lesson learned was the importance of building a strong network and strong relationships. Funding for the campaign came from the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Oral Health Kansas, the Kansas Dental Association, and two local dental society chapters. The pro-fluoridation group made early efforts to communicate with the local paper, *The Salina Journal*, which were unsuccessful. However, several weeks later, the paper published an article in support of the campaign. Campaign funds totaled nearly \$41,000.

Source: Megan Foreman, Policy Director of Oral Health Kansas

**Approximately 18,000 individuals in Salina were registered to vote.*

⁴ For more information, see: Stocks M, Pollick H. The CDA Foundation model to fluoridate communities. J Calif Dent Assoc. 2012 Aug; 40(8):648-55.

Boyne City, Michigan



Pop. 3,762



69% voted to retain CWF

Following a city commission vote to stop fluoridation, CWF advocates in Boyne City gathered enough petition signatures to put fluoridation on the November ballot.

Who Got Involved. A small group of local volunteers led the CWF effort in Boyne City. This group included Carl VanDomelen who works in marketing, leadership from the Michigan Community Dental Clinics, and local dentists.

What Worked. Using poll data from a similar community, the Boyne City team estimated that 20-25 percent of the population was pro-fluoridation and 20 percent was anti-fluoridation. The campaign included direct mail, newspaper advertisements, and social media efforts. Engagement with the local papers involved regular press releases and interviews. Anti-fluoridation activists put forth a substantial public relations effort, which included a very active Facebook presence. Carl VanDomelen, who led the CWF marketing effort in Boyne City, noted that they elected not to use yard signs, a divergent move from other communities, because they did not want to create a “neighbor vs. neighbor mentality.” The CWF effort in Boyne City received funding from the Michigan Dental Association, the American Dental Association, and Delta Dental. Campaign funds totaled \$9,000.

Source: Carl VanDomelen, a volunteer in the CWF effort



Pop. 2,332



63% voted to retain CWF

Bronson, Michigan

Although Branch County has been fluoridated for a number of years, only 30 percent of Bronson's population receives water that has the optimal fluoride level. In 2014, the Bronson city council voted to put fluoridation on the November ballot. The move to put fluoridation on the ballot was led by one city council member without apparent motivation from organized anti-fluoridation activists.

Who Got Involved. The pro-CWF effort in Bronson was a largely education-based initiative that the Michigan's state oral health system was involved in. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency led a community-wide education effort.

What Worked. Bronson did not receive much attention from anti-fluoridation groups. The Community Health Agency decided to focus the CWF efforts on community education, adopting a less heavy handed approach that they felt fit the needs of the community. Pro-fluoridation activists sent news articles to four local papers.

Source: Steve Todd, Health Officer at the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Kalama, Washington



Pop. 2,312



73% voted to retain CWF

In 2014, the Kalama City Council put CWF on the November ballot and agreed to follow the wishes of the voters. Kalama had been fluoridated for 50 years, but the mayor raised concerns about fluoridation and was a clear opponent. Notably, there were no other anti-fluoridation efforts in Kalama aside from the efforts of the mayor. However, early advocate efforts prevented the mayor from simply removing fluoridation.

Who Got Involved. The campaign was led by a strong local coalition with a paid coordinator. Washington Dental Society Foundation provided financial and material support to the campaign in Kalama, beginning with feasibility assessment and an assessment of necessary spending per voter. Outside experts helped with the templates for campaigns and materials like brochures and letters to the editor. The local leadership adapted materials and used them readily with minimal prompting. One of the Committee's first actions was to make a presentation to the school board after talking with the superintendent.

What Worked. The initial work of the campaign focused on educating the city council members and outreach to the local paper. Once fluoridation was on the ballot, members of "Keep Kalama Fluoridated," the local CWF advocates, distributed and produced yard signs, mailings, and radio ads. The pro-CWF campaign decided not to engage in door-to-door canvassing because they felt that residents would react negatively to this form of direct outreach, which is different from a lot of other community education efforts that do rely on door-to-door canvassing. One of the advocates, Leslie Bombadier, contacted the editor of the local Daily News and became an active source to him on CWF. The paper endorsed fluoridation. Kalama's efforts also benefited from the creation of a Facebook page. Campaign funds were in the range of \$25,000-\$30,000.

Source: Emily Firman, Senior Program Officer at the Washington Dental Society Foundation

Lessons Learned from Community Water Fluoridation Victories

Conversations with CWF advocates revealed five key components of a successful campaign. These five components are: 1) understanding the local context, 2) involving key players, 3) establishing a strategy, 4) obtaining necessary funding, and 5) understanding the opposition. The tables below outline recommended steps within each component.



	Questions to ask	Considerations
<p>1</p> <p>Understand the local context</p>  <p>local context</p>	What is the region's history and experience with CWF?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore CWF history of neighboring (possibly influential) communities
	Were there past CWF efforts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn from past local campaigns—who led the efforts, what was the opposition like, and what was the result?
	What is the political context?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand the politics of the community, including who has influence
	What other factors are important locally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage local community members and learn how to best engage the community based on its values and openness to CWF
	Why is CWF an issue in this community now?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Know if it will be a ballot or policy initiative Understand the community's concerns and the context of why this issue is being elevated at this time

	Questions to ask	Considerations
<p>2</p> <p>Involve key players</p>  <p>key players</p>	Are there external networks to help with the campaign?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bringing on a political consultant is helpful in larger cities, but resource-intensive American Academy of Pediatrics' Campaign for Dental Health has resources for local CWF campaigns [http://www.ilikemyteeth.org/] The American Dental Association [www.ada.org] and the Dental Association in your state often offer resources, ideas, and funding in support of CWF efforts⁵
	What internal network can be relied on to help with the campaign?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local dentists and doctors have the trust of the community and can be effective advocates Look for local politicians and/or other trusted influencers to serve as advocates Volunteers can be engaged in all aspects of campaigns (e.g., phone banking, graphic design)

⁵ American Dental Association (<http://www.ada.org/en/public-programs/advocating-for-the-public/fluoride-and-fluoridation>)

	Questions to ask	Considerations
<p>3 Establish a strategy</p> 	What media resources will be most helpful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional media, e.g., TV, radio, newspapers Social media – Facebook to be very helpful in some communities
	What campaign tools will be most helpful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear and accurate message – tools are available through the Campaign for Dental Health [http://www.ilikemyteeth.org/] Yard signs – though some communities may find yard signs create an antagonistic environment among neighbors Door-to-door and phone banking – these are time- and volunteer-intensive activities that require basic information about voters

	Questions to ask	Considerations
<p>4 Obtain necessary funding</p> 	Are there any funders at the local, state, or national level that would be interested in supporting CWF in your community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funders might include state dental foundations or health foundations, as well as state dental associations If there are no funders with express interest in oral health, there may be others interested in CWF including groups interested in community health or maternal and child health Keep in mind that funders may ask for a marketing plan or have other requirements Understanding the opposition and their strategic interest in your community may help make the case for additional resources
	What other sources of funding are available?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual donations require cultivating donors

	Questions to ask	Considerations
<p>5 Understand the opposition</p> 	What is the opposition's messaging?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is their central message or issue on CWF? Is it cost, science, or something else? How are they framing the issues? How are they circulating their message? Should the opposition be engaged in a debate?
	How much effort is the opposition putting towards this campaign?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial and other resources Anti-fluoridation groups might ignore a campaign or engage with it "full force"

Appendix: The Intense Period Debrief Method

Harder+Company Community Research, the DentaQuest Foundation's evaluation partner, conducted the research that informs this memo using *Intense Period Debrief* interview methodology. The protocol "is intended to elicit qualitative information from a group of key players (such as coalition leadership, staff, committees and field organizations) just after a period of intense advocacy activity."⁶ Harder+Company adapted the Innovation Network's protocol for this project, focusing on questions that would elicit a story about community context, effective strategies, and lessons learned.

Interview participants were selected in consultation with DentaQuest staff and members of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Campaign for Dental Health.

⁶ http://www.innonet.org/resources/files/intense_period_debrief.pdf