

The Role of Policy in Public Health

Policy refers to laws, regulations, administrative actions, incentives, and voluntary practices established by governments or institutions to guide decisions and allocate resources.⁴ Public policies are legally binding and enacted at federal, state, or local levels, while institutional policies are enforceable within specific organizations, though typically non-binding legally.⁵ This review focuses primarily on state-level public health policy.

In public health, policy development involves creating and implementing laws or guidelines that influence systems, organizational practices, and individual behaviors to improve health outcomes. Policies have played a critical role in major public health successes. For example, reductions in motor vehicle injuries, an accomplishment noted in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) "Ten Great Public Health Achievements,"⁶ have been attributed mainly to regulatory reforms designed to influence and alter human behavior.⁷ While commonly misconstrued, engaging in **policy work is separate from advocacy**, which is defined as strategic actions taken to drive social, organizational, or policy change on behalf of particular health goals or population health.⁸

Policy development is central to public health practice. Public health professionals contribute by conducting research, translating evidence into action, building partnerships, and in their personal time, advocating for science-based policy solutions.

Workforce Gaps in Policy Skills

In 2024, Safe States Alliance collected data, providing a point-in-time snapshot of the injury prevention field through an 'Injury & Violence Prevention Program Infrastructure and Workforce Development Survey.' Of the 393 respondents, **less than half indicated they could apply the three key advocacy or policy-related skills** of coordinating with stakeholders, disseminating stories of success or challenges met, or educating policymakers and stakeholders. At least a quarter perceived a lack of organizational support to participate in these activities.⁹ Of those surveyed, 44% work in government settings, with 60% specifically employed by state health departments, which represents the primary demographic for this review.

Policy Forum Overview

A significant disparity was identified between the critical need for policies aimed at reducing injury and violence and the discomfort many individuals feel when using policy-related skills.

To address this gap and gain further insights, Safe States Alliance hosted its first-ever Policy Forum in Columbia, South Carolina. The event brought together participants from the Southeastern (SE) and Southwestern (SW) regions of the United States, including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

The policy forum featured:

- a policy landscape overview, where participants examined key trends in IVP policy across SE&SW states;
- a deep dive into the impact of state-level policies using examples from North Carolina and Texas, to articulate the impact of policy decisions on IVP outcomes through the lens of either a policymaker or a member of the public;
- a panel discussion focused on how professionals across sectors have used policy to positively inform or influence their work, while identifying barriers to IVP policy advancement; and
- a culminating activity where participants defined one priority IVP policy issue and drafted a personalized roadmap outlining specific steps they can take to support or influence change through their work.