

Communicating About Disease Forecasting

Communicating effectively about disease forecasting data is essential for the public to understand the associated risks, implications, and recommended actions. It's also critical for policymakers who can use the data to determine effective, equitable strategies for outbreak response. In turn, the public can make informed decisions to keep safe. Each audience, including the media, will likely need tailored messages about the indications and limitations of a given forecast. Approaches for communicating about disease forecasts/models with policymakers and the public align with many of the key tenets of public health communications more broadly.

Public health practitioners should consider integrating [Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication](#) (CERC) principles, which suggest that communications be *first, right, credible, empathetic, actionable, and respectful* to help the public make informed decisions during challenging circumstances.

Communicating with Policymakers

Policymakers—public health or elected—have important decision-making and rule-making authority; additional considerations may be needed when communicating with them about disease forecasting. Interactions frequently occur through staffers, who may have limited knowledge and/or time. In addition to CERC principles, communications should also be:

- **Relevant.** Tailor communications to policymakers' priorities to emphasize potential impacts on resource allocation, public health outcomes, local or regional policies, and public sentiment.
- **Collaborative.** Foster relationships with policymakers and offer subject matter expertise on forecasting to inform policy decisions.
- **Timely.** Provide frequent updates, allowing for proactive collaboration, decision-making, and communication with the public.
- **Concise.** Develop briefs that summarize forecasts and their implications for constituents.
- **Consistent.** Build trust with policymakers and their staff between emergencies to highlight disease forecasting as a useful tool whose methodologies, data sources, and limitations are clear.

Communicating with the Public

In addition to CERC principles and in collaboration with media partners, communication about disease forecasts/models with the public should be:

- **Accessible.** Provide easily accessed information about methodology, data sources, and limitations in the forecasts.
- **Clear.** Use jargon-free, non-technical language to convey critical messages.
- **Contextualized.** Frame forecasts within the broader public health context, emphasizing how individual and community actions can mitigate risk, and reinforce the effects of collective actions as part of an outbreak response.

- **Empowering.** Give the public reasonable, actionable steps to protect themselves and their communities.
- **Local.** Use social media, news releases, listening sessions, and other relevant means to reach as broad an audience as possible. Collaborate with community leaders and healthcare providers to amplify messaging and reduce misinformation.
- **Frequent.** Keep the public informed with regular updates on forecast products including changes in local risk levels, new trends, guidance, and recommendations.

Utah's Best Practices for Communicating Forecasts

During the COVID-19 response, the Utah Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) modeled potential disease transmission and shared how to effectively communicate with the media and public.

DO

- Create diverse forecasting and communications teams that include public health, universities, and 'bonus' team members (e.g., political representatives, laboratories, and health economists).
- Clarify the purpose for which a given model was developed.
- Discuss the limitations of the disease model.
- Communicate about future outcomes (i.e., what would happen without further intervention).
- Provide language on how to alter the current path (e.g., 'With this intervention, we could potentially avoid...')
- Remind audiences that models can affect the future, not only predict it.
- Share information and data that are digestible for the public.

DON'T

- Sound definitive when outcomes aren't clear or make predictions using absolute terms.
- Omit a variety of scenarios or tools when presenting a forecast.
- Disregard inherent uncertainties in forecasts.
- Show models with conflicting results.

Utah DHHS also recognized that members of the media are key partners in communicating public health messages; closely coordinating and contextualizing forecasts helps communicate accurate conclusions and/or recommendations. Communicators and staff should be prepared and have information ready to share for more complex questions as needed. Storytelling with forecasts and models helps the reader internalize them and make informed decisions.

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