



COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES FOR HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

A Resource for MIECHV Awardees

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About MIECHV

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) supports voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk pregnant women and parents with young children up to kindergarten entry. The MIECHV Program builds on decades of scientific research showing that home visits by a nurse, social worker, early childhood educator, or other trained professional during pregnancy and in the first years of a child's life improve the lives of children and families by preventing child abuse and neglect, supporting positive parenting, improving maternal and child health, and promoting child development and school readiness. States, territories, and tribal communities receive funding through the MIECHV Program and have the flexibility

to select home visiting service delivery models that best meet their needs. The MIECHV Program is administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in partnership with the Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

MIECHV Awardee Messaging and Communications

MIECHV awardees regularly interact with many different stakeholders in a variety of ways. They are called on to request and share information, present opportunities, foster new partnerships while nurturing existing ones, and tell stories of success in home visiting across broad and diverse audiences. The most common obstacle to developing a strategic communication plan is lack of time. Most often, communications planning is not written into any one person's job description, which, at times, hinders an organization's ability to make it a top priority. This guide includes tips that MIECHV awardees can use to work collaboratively with fellow staff, as well as with their agency's communications team, to develop and strengthen their communications plan, to produce effective messaging, and to shape and refine their communication strategies for various audiences. A thoughtful, well-designed plan for communications will improve relationships both internally among the MIECHV awardee staff, and externally to the various stakeholders and partners.



Creating a Strategic Communications Plan

An internal strategic communications plan helps MIECHV awardees hone their communications efforts and tailor them to a variety of constituents. Each awardee will benefit from creating a plan and refining it regularly.

The following action steps are key to the development of a successful communications plan:

1. Gather the necessary staff involved with planning, creating, revising, approving, and sending your messages, as well as collecting data on their effectiveness. Including all stakeholders will ensure that many different perspectives are considered; in addition, stakeholders can best support the communications plan if they are involved in creating it. Full support from the leaders who set organizational policies and direction will help implementation of the plan become a reality.
2. Work as a team to identify your target audiences, the messages you will share, and your communication goals for each audience. Decide how

you will define success. For example, an awardee reaching out to its local implementing agencies (LIAs) may have a goal of being clear, thorough, and detailed in its messages and may prefer a written approach so that information can be referenced again as needed. On the contrary, an awardee sharing information with busy partners may have a goal of creating messages that are personalized yet concise, sharing only the necessary information for that particular partner's role in the program administration or implementation. Consider the example of a Social Impact Story Map from [Hattaway Communications](#) to help organize and share your message.

STATUS QUO & FIRST STEPS

- Eyes Opened
- Doubts Arise
- Solutions Emerge
- First Steps

OBSTACLES & ALLIES

- Obstacles Encountered
- Allies Join



BREAKTHROUGH

- Action Taken
- Breakthrough Occurs

IMPACT

- Lives Are Changed
- Lessons Shared
- Call to Action

When sharing your message, audiences can be broken down (in general) into these four categories:

opposed, apathetic, supportive, or persuadable. These four steps can help you create your Social Impact Story Map and move audiences away from opposed and apathetic toward supportive and persuadable.

- The first step in preparing and sharing your message involves fostering awareness about your organization and mission.
- The second step involves addressing obstacles and creating partnerships with organizations who share a similar mission and goals, or who's work complements yours.
- The third step in garnering social impact around your message is to take action on getting the message out, making breakthroughs, and reaching your audiences.
- Finally, the fourth step involves making an impact—how is your message spreading knowledge and sharing the lessons you have learned, and in essence, beginning to change lives?

Hattaway Communications, September 2017.



Various methods of data collection include, but are not limited to:

- percent of your total contacts that open or click through a resource;
- number of website hits or downloads; number of social media “likes” or shares;
- number of discussions started on a shared platform or portal; number of mentions in media outlets;
- percentage of stakeholders that respond positively to prompts about satisfaction; engagement ratings of a meeting from low, to moderate, to high;
- perceived accessibility and usefulness of MIECHV awardee services; and more.

It is important to set benchmarks and goals that will help you measure your success. For example, if your website currently receives 100 visits per month, aim for a set percentage increase after a set amount of time. While making intentional strides at improving traffic to your website, you will be collecting data to help you measure your progress.

3. Record your present strengths and areas of need concerning communications. For example, are you able to make efficient and effective use of social media in your approaches? Are any staff well-versed in face-to-face or voice-to-voice communication, and can they help deliver your messages through phone conferences, webinars, or even in-person meetings? Do you have success with generic blasts with updates and information, or have you found that a more personalized approach results in more “opens” and “click throughs” to your emails? Is the local media positioned to help your cause? Consider both the organizational background and external environment as you consider strengths and areas for growth. Creating this list of where you are successful and where you need more support will help shape your plan. You can also use this information to create a list of action steps to improve your areas of need.
4. Determine possible barriers to communication for the audiences you’ve identified, and decide on the best method of communication with each one. The Communication Strategy Tips chart in this guide suggests various methods, modes, approaches, and tactics for different audiences. Another excellent source of information is to talk with fellow MIECHV awardees about what approaches they have tried, what they have found successful, and how they have overcome communication challenges with their stakeholders.
5. Determine a timeline, budget, and how you will gather data and evaluate your efforts. You may benefit from creating your own planning calendar or grid to track your progress and to note any needed changes to your approach for each audience.
6. Revisit your communications plan at least twice annually to see what changes need to be made. Have you found a new audience? What are your goals with that new audience? Are your strengths still your strengths? Have you made progress on improving your areas of need? Are your main approaches for each audience still effective? Be sure to bring data to your bi-annual check-in meetings to determine trends, what seems to be working and why it may be working, and what doesn’t seem to be working and why it may not be. This bi-annual check in will help ensure you are using your time and resources effectively, and also that the team continues to be on the same page about your goals and approach. The Communication Strategies Across Audiences section of this resource offers various methods, modes, approaches, and tactics for various stakeholders.
7. You can download and adapt this [sample template](#) for creating your own communications plan.

Top 10 Tips for Communicating Effectively

Effective messages are clear and simple, brief, believable, compelling, and delivered by the right messenger. The tips below support MIECHV awardees' effective messaging efforts.

1. **Personalize your message.** Create subgroups within your master distribution list to help you target the most relevant audience. Customize delivery of your key messages to speak directly to each subgroup.
2. **Avoid jargon.** Invite those not directly involved with your program to review your messages. Are they clear? Have you used terms that are not familiar to the general public? Spell out any abbreviations used in your messages. Add a glossary to clarify terms.
3. **Use your data.** Collect and analyze the numbers around who is engaging with your communication efforts. What trends do you notice? What areas can you work to improve? Try small changes, such as a catchier title or using photos with your announcements, to see if your engagement rates increase.
4. **Include a call to action.** After reading your message, will readers think, "So what?" or will they have a concrete next step—such as investigating a resource or website, forwarding the information to a colleague, or embarking on a plan for change within their own program?
5. **Be innovative, and make your materials eye-catching.** Ensure that resources have their own unique look by using a template or a consistent header. Experiment with varying your approach, such as using visuals, posting a survey, sharing an infographic, announcing something new or exciting happening in your program, or including quotes, testimonials, and humor, as appropriate.
6. **Maintain the look and content of your website.** Many of your communication efforts will lead your audience back to your website, whether to access a resource, post a comment in a discussion forum, or read a blog. Regularly update your site, and use search engine optimization to help browsers locate it more easily.
7. **Cross-market.** Refer to related program resources in each message you send. Include web-links and references to resources from community partners as well. (Just be sure to invite partners to review and approve any messages that include their information before sending it.)
8. **Ensure that your materials are error-free.** Always have a few different people review your materials, including a copy editor when possible. Use spelling and grammar checks on your computer, and read all materials one final time, word for word, before sending them.
9. **Follow up.** When someone expresses interest in your messaging, data, and stories, respond quickly. Be sure to keep the conversation going by asking what connections they see to their own work, and what possibilities for future collaboration they can imagine—or just check in to see if they have additional questions or needs.
10. **Experiment with different methods.** Using the same method of sharing your message will typically get you the same results. Use the grid that follows to draw in more people, and customize your messages depending on the needs of your audience.



Communication Strategies Across Audiences

MIECHV awardees can use the ideas in this grid to shape and refine their communication strategies for various audiences. Whether your mode of communication is email, direct mail, newsletters, a website, social media, the phone, or even in-person meetings, tailoring the approach to the audience will help maximize their engagement and the effectiveness of your messaging. Cross-reference the audience with your current or planned communication strategy to find useful tips on creating and honing your message and increasing audience engagement.

Key Approaches				
Audience	Email/Mail	Newsletters/Print Resources	Social Media	Face to Face/Voice to Voice (meetings, webinars, calls, etc.)
<i>State-level leaders, agencies and partners</i>	Keep your list of state-level partners and agency leadership up to date. Use email and mailings as a way to keep state-level leadership in the know about your program happenings, how you may overlap and work together toward a shared mission, and how MIECHV may help fill the service gaps in the state. Keep your message brief and clear, create infographics , use visuals, and provide data.	Ensure that your newsletters are in the hands of state-level leaders and partners so they will know the value of your work. Thank the state-level leaders and your partners regularly, and highlight how their contributions help you reach your goals. Seek input on upcoming policy information to include in your publications. Follow state-level partners' activities related to home visiting by monitoring their website or the news, and report on it in your newsletter.	Follow state-level leaders and agency partners on social media to stay alert for shared interests and opportunities. Use social media to alert stakeholders of potential areas for expansion or growth. Post questions or comments that direct attention to your efforts in home visiting, as well as to efforts across MIECHV.	Create not just "talking points" but "connecting points" for your shared interactions. These connections remind both partners about shared vision. Regularly thank state-level leaders and partners for their collaborative efforts. Be ready with new ideas for innovation and change during in-person meetings. Offer supporting data for your ideas by sharing the evidence-based information that that your state-level partners will expect.
<i>Local implementing agencies (LIAs)</i>	Keep your contact list up to date so you can pass on important information from HRSA, Technical Assistance (TA) Partners, and other sources that will help LIAs achieve their outcomes and keep them informed about upcoming events and opportunities. Update your master list and any sub-lists with specific audiences at least quarterly. Send email alerts and press releases with pertinent information.	Include relevant information for meeting performance measures and making an impact on the staff and families the LIAs serve. Highlight program successes, and share useful community resources. Gather uplifting stories from staff, and share these stories within and across LIAs to highlight accomplishments and celebrate MIECHV's vision and mission.	Develop a social media policy. Set up your social media sites to allow a designated staff person to review comments or posts before they are published. This will help protect the confidentiality of staff and the families that the LIAs serve. Share posts that are directly relevant to staff and families. Consider setting up a private forum on social media where your LIAs can share their questions and discussions with you, with others in their organization, and even across other LIAs.	Build trust and rapport with LIAs by establishing a relationship outside of monitoring and reporting requirements. Be a support and resource to LIAs by sharing their successes and helping with their challenges. Consider connecting via webinars or video conferences to establish more opportunities for face-to-face contact. Act as a team, and work to build bridges between LIAs to help them connect with one another if they are encountering similar difficulties or working on similar projects (e.g., starting a Continuous Quality Improvement Learning Collaborative).

Key Approaches (cont.)

Audience	Email/Mail	Newsletters/Print Resources	Social Media	Face to Face/Voice to Voice (meetings, webinars, calls, etc.)
<i>Community partners</i>	Personalize your messages, and regularly highlight local data that are relevant to each community partner. For example, if one partner is specifically focused on breast-feeding, be sure to highlight data and program happenings on that topic. Unless the same information applies to everyone, partners will appreciate receiving information that is directly pertinent to your work together.	Share program newsletters with community partners so they can stay abreast of your efforts. Invite community partners to contribute to your newsletters, and regularly highlight the resources they offer. In turn, provide updates about your program for community partners to include in their own newsletters.	Share posts for your partners' review before posting. Strive to accurately reflect their voice as well as your own. Spread the word about your successful partnership efforts on social media, which can have a large reach and is likely to pique the interest of future partners. Locate what social media outlets your partners use and follow those sites.	Invite community partners to attend your events. Provide the opportunity for them to hear your stories either via webinars or in person to continue to remind them of the value of what they bring to your home visiting efforts. Consider hosting joint events in your community.
<i>Home visitors</i>	Keep information concise and relevant. Share updates, tips, and tools through easy-to-access resources and links—for example, set up a “Newsday Tuesday” with 5–10 reminders or updates in a bulleted list. Home visitors will come to expect this weekly round-up, which also serves as a back-up message in case they missed any of the day-to-day contacts.	Include tips and strategies that help make home visitors' work more effective and their data collection and reporting more efficient. Consider doing a “Spotlight” feature on home visitors as a great way to recognize their hard work.	Show regular appreciation for those in the home visiting field, and post useful resources to aid them in their work. Consider setting up a private platform on social media so they can hold discussions with one another, share successes, and trouble-shoot problems.	Ask questions (e.g., What is going well? What could go better?), and listen to their stories—then use this valuable information to guide practical changes.
<i>Future collaborators</i>	Share your program's stories, successes, and opportunities. Within the definition of “future collaborators,” consider how you are keeping the future workforce up to date on your program happenings and employment opportunities. Ask current staff where they learned about your program, and explore those avenues for staff recruitment. As you investigate future partners, be specific in what needs you may have and what strengths they may be able to share.	Remember that potential partners are looking for connections to their mission and work. Get to know your potential partners so you can spotlight information relevant to your shared goals. For example, create a fact sheet on potential future partners, and ensure that all staff who regularly connect with those organization are aware of all they offer.	Appeal to future collaborators by regularly referencing their work and inviting them to join in the conversation. Use social media planning platforms to stay abreast of posts from organizations of interest. Follow the same organizations that your potential collaborators follow to see what common interests you share, and engage regularly with those organizations through your posts.	Practice motivational interviewing when face to face with a potential partner. Ask open-ended questions, such as, “How did your program begin?” Listen intently, and reflect back what you hear. Be prepared with your “ask,” which should highlight your shared goals and specific opportunities for shared success. Ensure that future collaborators are aware of upcoming (or even recorded) webinars to keep them up to date on program happenings. Develop and practice your “ elevator pitch ,” should you get some in-person time with a future collaborator, and be sure to include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of home visiting (you might share a short story of success with a local family) • The greatest needs • Ways they can help make a difference for many local families

Key Approaches (cont.)

Audience	Email/Mail	Newsletters/Print Resources	Social Media	Face to Face/Voice to Voice (meetings, webinars, calls, etc.)
Families	Use postcards, emails, and text messages to reach families. Create messages that are short, engaging, and of interest. Include photos of families when possible, and avoid jargon. Be sure to make every effort to share materials in families' home languages, including using Google Translate when necessary. Consider sending a quarterly or bi-annual "thank you" for being part of the program.	Design newsletters specifically for families. Keep them brief and relevant. Seek contributions from families, and get permission to share their personal stories. Note upcoming events that might be of interest, and feature your community partners regularly.	Use the social media sites that most appeal to your families. Include images with your posts, and direct your tips and resources to what families most need. Invite them to share stories with others to spread the word about program successes. Use social media as an opportunity to invite families to connect with one another. Set up your social media sites to allow a designated staff person to review comments or posts before they are published.	Invite families to share what is going well and what could go better—for instance, hold focus groups, or conduct satisfaction surveys. Share this information with others in your program, and discuss what improvements or tests of change you might want to try.

Additional Methods, Modes, Tactics, and Approaches include: Action alerts; briefing kits; brochures; bumper stickers; columns in the newspaper; direct mail; display tables; educational or informational videos; letters to the editor; news conferences; online forums; op-ed pieces; paid advertising; phone calls; public service announcements (PSAs); rallies/celebrations; signs; slide shows; talk radio; TV spots (Source: IMPACS, 2005, *Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society*).



Resources to Support Effective Communications and Messaging

Grouped into broad topics of most interest to MIECHV awardees, these links below offer practical information and useful resources to support continued honing of communication strategies and messaging.

Creating Communications Plans

- Determine your content, engagement efforts, [most effective strategy](#), and evaluation method for your communications.
- Hone [best practices](#) for your communication approaches.
- Do your pre-work and lay a foundation before you create your communications plan.
- Look over these [FAQs](#) to get you on the “write” path for developing your communications plan.

Telling Your Story

- Deliver the [right message](#), at the right time, with the right content.
- Watch this [webinar](#) on how to use storytelling and data visualization to connect to your audience.
- Learn about the “[Three Stories](#) Leaders Must Tell.”

Effectively Displaying Data

- Review tips on data visualization, and download a free “[chart chooser](#)” and planning guide.
- [Organize](#) and present your data effectively.
- [Tell your story](#) with data.
- Access interactive fact sheets, and [insert your own MIECHV awardee data](#).
- Communicate your data findings to a [variety of stakeholders](#).

Enhancing Your Website

- [Measure the effectiveness](#) of the content on your site.
- Diversify what you offer to attract a [broad audience](#).
- Explore [10 well-designed nonprofit websites](#), and learn why their look and approach work

Making the Best Use of Email

- Market through [email for nonprofits](#).
- Explore tips for [engaging your audience](#) through email.
- Watch this webinar on creating an effective email [marketing approach](#), from subject line to design.

Customizing Your Newsletters

- Gather [ideas from nonprofit newsletters](#) that each have their own unique look and approach.
- Increase the likelihood that your readers will open and then [interact with](#) your newsletter content.
- Access [free newsletter templates](#) for nonprofit organizations.

Resources to Support Effective Communications and Messaging (cont.)

Planning Your Social Media Efforts

- Maintain your organization's confidential and [proprietary information](#).
- [Measure](#) your social media success.
- Explore how and why certain [social media strategies](#) are more successful than others.
- Follow this [step-by-step process](#) for developing, implementing, and evaluating a social marketing plan.

Honing Your Skills to Enhance Verbal Connections

- Review why [face-to-face](#) communication is such a powerful tool.
- Explore these tips for [successful connections](#), including how to really listen, avoid distractions, and deal with difficult situations.
- Design an effective [elevator pitch](#).

Sources:

Hattaway Communications: *Telling Stories of Impact Workbook*. September 2017.

Strategic Communication Planning for Not-for-Profit Organizations, 2005. *Plan the Work: Strategic Communication Planning Handbook*. Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) for the Centre for Community Organizations (COCO).