

HEALTH POLICY/ENFORCEMENT

A health policy is a **regulatory, legislative, or organizational ruling** that supports improvements in the public's health.

Health policy CAN achieve several objectives:

- Lower the risk of being injured or becoming ill (e.g., Laws that prohibit students' bringing weapons into school reduce the likelihood of use of weapons at school.)
- Change organizational goals (e.g., In an effort to reduce HIV infection among students, some school districts have added HIV/AIDS education to the curriculum.)
- Provide formal or informal guidelines for programs (e.g., The adoption of *Healthy People 2000* by the Department of Health and Human Services provided public health workers with guidelines for setting program priorities, goals, and objectives.)
- Require changes in behavior or environment (e.g., In buildings with a smoke-free policy, smokers cannot smoke in the building or must smoke in designated areas where secondhand smoke will not affect others in the environment.)
- Support the efforts of individuals to alter their behavior (e.g., Health warnings on alcohol labels can remind users not to drink and drive or to abstain from drinking while pregnant.)

Health policy CANNOT accomplish some objectives:

- Cannot ensure the enforcement of new laws (e.g., some regulations to reduce injuries and deaths from firearms have already been enacted, but many are neither widely known nor well enforced. Using the media to publicize fines and prison terms associated with carrying firearms along with partnering with local police to enact laws can increase the effectiveness of these regulations.)
- Cannot ensure that new laws are supported or obeyed by the population (e.g., although drinking and driving is illegal, the combination of alcohol and motor vehicle use is still a public health problem. The success of this law is tied to changes in social norms and attitudes towards drinking and driving.)
- Cannot enable a population to act if they have no means to do so (e.g., although child safety seats are required in most states, many parents cannot afford them or do not know how to install them in their vehicles. Publicizing programs that provide free child seats and demonstrating proper installation can help parents comply with the law.)

A few other points about health policy should be considered:

- Some regulations or laws exist but are not enforced or well known.
- Those who profit from current policy may resist changes.
- Drafting and passing new laws can be time consuming and arduous and may require skills and resources not available in the public health arena.