



## The Nation's Health Podcast transcript

### S25, EP9 Silence isn't science: Why public health needs to get loud

*October 2025*

**SHELLEY HEARNE:** It doesn't matter if you're a government worker or you're a community engaged worker — whatever you're doing, everyone can be an advocate.

**SOPHIA MEADOR:** *From the American Public Health Association, I'm Sophia Meador and this is The Nation's Health Podcast.*

*When people buckle their seat belts, breathe clean air in a restaurant, check a nutrition label or get a vaccine, a common force connects all these public health protections: advocacy.*

*Advocacy has fueled some of the most significant health advances in communities across the country. Yet despite this, many public health professionals underestimate the power their voices have in shaping policy.*

*According to the 2024 Public Health Workforce Interest and Needs Survey, nearly half of state and local public health workers expressed a desire for more training on policy engagement, a clear sign that both interest and urgency are growing.*

*This raises an important question: How can public health professionals become more effective advocates, and why does it matter now more than ever?*

*In this episode, the podcast explores the role of advocacy in public health with Dr. Shelley Hearne, a former board member of the American Public Health Association and director of the Lerner Center for Public Health Advocacy at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.*

*Dr. Hearne joins the conversation to share her insights on why advocacy remains at the heart of progress in public health.*

**Dr. Hearne, welcome to the show and thank you for being here.**

HEARNE: Sophia, it's an honor.

**Well, to begin, can you talk a bit about who all is able to be an advocate?**

Well, we certainly need everyone in our field to be an advocate. It's really basic — doesn't matter if you're a government worker or you're a community-engaged worker — whatever you're doing, we need the real-world experiences to get engaged and heard by our people who are making the decisions on our policies. Everyone can be an advocate; you just have to know the rules.

**Sure, and is there a difference between advocacy and lobbying?**

Yes, lobbying is a very narrow sub-section of advocacy. Advocacy — actually there are definitions out there by APHA — you're a champion for the causes that you care about. In my book, that is the definition of public health.

Lobbying is a very specific component covered by the IRS that clarifies who, when, how you can talk to specific legislators about specific legislation at specific time frames.

Generally, the work we do as advocates — as champions — is about education. It's educating policymakers and the deciders. It's not lobbying.

**And Dr. Hearne, do you think there's a lack of engagement in public health advocacy?**

Unfortunately, we — for many reasons — have been timid about engaging with our elected officials and even our regulatory agencies.

For some reason, we think that we aren't allowed to; we're not supposed to, or somehow it's biasing our science. When, in fact, if you are going to make sure that evidence, facts and data matter in policymaking, we actually have to have the people who know this information — who have been the researchers, who have been working on the front lines — to be the ones to translate it, to make sure that our policies are being informed by science.

We're the people to do that. And that's why advocacy is so important.

**Do you think there's any common misconceptions about advocacy?**

Well, you brought up one, which is that many people think advocacy is lobbying and 'I can't do it,' when in fact it's a very limited set of activities that would fall under that header.

Most times, going to town halls, asking questions, developing relationships with your elected officials and being a scientist, being a public health expert who can help them understand issues, help frame questions for hearings or even give them ideas about policies — that's not lobbying.

That's about making sure that public health science, facts and information are getting into the hands of the people who are deciding on the issues that we know are going to make or break this country's health.

**So, what does public health advocacy look like today? And do you think it needs to change at all?**

Oh, it certainly needs to change, because it hasn't been working too well. And as our listeners all know, it doesn't matter what issue you're working on — reproductive health, health equity, environmental and occupational safety, gun violence — you name the list, we're being challenged right now on the policies that we know will make a difference. So we have to change.

And one of the things that has been, I think, rising to the top is that people aren't sure what to trust anymore. And it's almost like, when we develop friends and friendships, we know what it is that we need to have trust: you have to show up, you have to know that that person's in your camp, you have to have some of that integrity. If you're not there in the relationship, well then people don't know who you are, and they don't know to trust you.

So getting back to basics — advocacy is showing up. It's letting those decisionmakers get to know you. Be a resource, be helpful. And the more we can do it — I don't care if it's through social media or good old-fashioned retail politics — meet those decisionmakers, develop a relationship. This is long-term, sustained. That's how you become an effective champion for public health.

**Where can listeners go to learn more about advocacy?**

It's a great question. I truly believe that anyone who goes into public health is, by definition, an advocate, because you've gotten into this field because you care. You are there for a reason. You're someone who wants to make a difference.

Now, if you want to make a difference really effectively, I'd actually suggest you read the book that APHA Press put out — it's called "Policy Engagement." I know that's not the sexiest title, but, boy, does this book spell it out in a very accessible way. You can be an absolute beginner, nervous on this advocacy thing, and this is a primer that will walk you through different ways to do it.

Not everyone has to be standing in front of Congress and testifying or marching in the streets. There are lots of different ways to be helpful, to be a resource, and to be heard — and to make sure that public health is heard in those policymaking worlds. So, APHA Press's "Policy Engagement" — that's the ticket.

**Advocacy can take many shapes. Whether it's sending an email to a city council member, calling a state legislator, or meeting face to face with members of Congress on Capitol Hill, it doesn't always require a megaphone or a big rally — it oftentimes it starts with a conversation.**

**Becca Boulos, executive director of the Maine Public Health Association and a member of the APHA Action Board, has more on what advocacy looks like in action.**

**Dr. Boulos, welcome to *The Nation's Health* Podcast. It's great to have you here.**

**You take part in advocacy in many ways. What does your advocacy circles usually look like?**

BOULOS: Yeah, that's a great, great question. I would say that our partnerships and our circle are really broad — it's other health organizations, it's chambers of commerce, it's stakeholders, it's our members, it's people that are in communities across Maine and it's elected officials. You know, it really is a broad, kind of, cadre of different folks who are impacted by public health policies.

**And in Maine, what is your Affiliate doing to advocate for public health at the state and local level?**

Yeah, we do advocacy at the local, state and federal levels, and we think about it along a continuum. We do education, we provide information and data about different public health issues in our state, and then we advocate for policies or programs that are evidence-based and that we think will help address those public health issues.

The other thing that we do is we organize meetings for our members to connect with our elected officials at the state and federal levels. And that really gives them, our members a chance to talk about their work and introduce themselves. It puts a face with a name and a face with a job. So it helps our policymakers connect with public health in a different way.

**Dr. Boulos, you are also chair of APHA's Action Board. What does APHA's advocacy look like?**

APHA sets policy priorities every year, and they're really focused right now on public health funding, workforce authority — really the infrastructure that we need to safeguard the public's health. I would say the organization overall is really leading the charge on holding the current administration accountable for public health rollbacks.

The way they do that, in terms of engaging with the broader membership, is through action alerts and policy updates. There are both written updates and there's a standing webinar where you can meet with the APHA's government relations team.

And then the other thing that the Action Board is working on is strengthening connections between the APHA Sections and the state Affiliates — really drawing on the expertise of the sections and the relationships that Affiliates have with state and federal policymakers.

**And on a more personal level, what does it mean for you to be an advocate for public health?**

For me, it means speaking up. I think that sometimes we can forget that public health is political, and that we elect people to office who make policy and funding decisions that directly impact our work. It's really easy for them to not fund a program or adopt a policy that they don't understand.

And so I think it's our responsibility as public health professionals to provide that education — to provide that advocacy — to those elected officials and also to our community members. Because then we grow, we grow our movement, we grow our broader public health advocacy partners.

To me, that's what it is — that's what it means to be an advocate for public health.

**So where would you send someone who does not have a background in advocacy, who is interested in getting started in public health work?**

A couple different places. So I always recommend that people get connected with their state Affiliate. We're always doing advocacy, like I said at our at the state and federal level. So if you're not already a member and connected to your state Affiliate, please do that.

And then the other thing I would do is look to APHA and see what advocacy opportunities there are. Like I said, it could be as simple as adding your name to a sign-on letter or sharing a fact sheet that they've developed on a given policy topic.

Or you could be more involved with the Sections that you belong to in APHA — there's also advocacy opportunities there. So, there's different entry points. It just kind of depends on which one you're most excited about.

**And finally, with all the challenges facing the public health infrastructure, do you think advocacy is especially critical right now?**

Yeah, I do. This past weekend, I was talking with someone who asked me if the government was shut down, and, you know, is that true? And what does it mean? I was really caught off guard because the shutdown is so front and center in what I'm thinking about and working on right now with our members.

It was a great opportunity to have that conversation and really talk about it. It was a bridge-building moment, which we're looking for all the time now, because now this person has a little bit more information about what does it mean for the government to shut down, what that means for services, and what that means for federal workers.

Social media certainly creates silos that we can exist in, even in our community. So continuing to do that advocacy, continuing to do that education, continuing to meet with people and have those conversations — that is a form of advocacy, and it feels especially important.

***For more information on public health advocacy, listeners can visit [APHA.org/advocacy](https://www.apha.org/advocacy) to find tools, resources and opportunities to get involved.***

***And for those attending this year's APHA Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., there's a special opportunity to take action in-person. On Wednesday, Nov. 5, from 2:30 to 4 p.m., public health advocates will gather at the National Mall to highlight urgent public health priorities.***

***The event will focus on pressing issues such as increased investment in public health, strengthening the workforce, preventing gun violence, advancing reproductive rights and addressing climate and environmental health.***

***It's a clear message to policymakers and the public alike: protecting the nation's health isn't optional — it's essential.***