

TIPS & TOOLS #6: USING PUBLIC RECORDS

- **What data sources would be considered “records”?**
 - City Council or County Board of Supervisor meeting minutes and related staff reports
 - Tenant council meeting minutes
 - Coalition meeting minutes
 - Training protocols (such as for training law enforcement about tobacco control policies)
 - Administrative records, quarterly reports
 - Previous evaluation reports

Hypothetical Example #1: City Council Meeting Records

Project objective: A project has an objective of having at least two cities adopt and implement a tobacco retail licensing policy.

Before developing their intervention: Project staff reviewed City Council minutes and staff reports to learn:

- Has the city considered other tobacco control policies in the past?
- What was the outcome of past proposals for tobacco control policies?
- What issues were raised for or against the proposals?

They used this information to develop materials for the current intervention focusing on tobacco retail licensing policies.

After implementing their intervention: Of the three cities they targeted, only one adopted a policy. At the end of the project, staff reviewed the minutes of all three city councils to learn:

- What issues for or against the policy were discussed during consideration of the policy?
- Who voted for the policy and who voted against the policy?
- In the city that adopted the policy, what information seemed most important in getting the policy passed?
- In the cities that did not adopt the policy, what considerations seemed to be the most important barriers to getting the policy passed?

This information is used to understand the process of the intervention: what worked, what did not work, and how the intervention could be improved in the future.

- **What kinds of information can records provide?**
 - Information about the priorities, attitudes, and knowledge of an individual or group
 - *Example:* Reviewing coalition meeting minutes can help you see how coalition priorities have changed over time.
 - Documentation of the individuals or groups who support or oppose a proposed policy
 - *Example:* Meeting minutes often identify who testified for or against past policies, and which groups they represented, information that can be used to identify potential allies in creating public support for a new policy.
 - Documentation of who in a decision-making body voted for or against a proposed policy.
 - *Example:* A record of votes cast by city council members can be used to target future educational activities.
 - Information about past experiences and lessons learned
 - *Example:* Reviewing evaluation reports can help your project identify promising practices used by other tobacco control projects.

Hypothetical Example #2: Tenant Council Meeting Minutes

Project objective: A project has an objective of having at least two multi-unit housing complexes adopt and implement a policy banning smoking in common areas.

Before developing their intervention: Project staff reviewed records of past tenant council meetings to learn: Who are the leaders – formal and informal – in the meetings? This information was used to target educational activities to tenant leaders.

After implementing their intervention: The project was successful in getting two complexes to adopt policies banning smoking, but one policy limited the ban to the playground, while the other complex banned smoking in all common areas.

Project staff reviewed the minutes of all three tenant councils to learn:

- In the complex that adopted the limited policy, what issues were raised that kept the council from adopting the more comprehensive policy?
- In the complex that adopted the comprehensive policy, what information or considerations seemed most important in getting all the common areas included in the policy?

To fill in some of the details that were not included in the minutes, project staff also conducted short key informant interviews with one or two members of each council.

As with the review of the city council records in Example #1, the post-intervention information was used to understand the process of the intervention: what worked, what did not work, and how the intervention could be improved in the future.

- **How do I collect and analyze the data from records?**

- First, develop a simple record review form that identifies the specific information you want from the records.

Sample Record Review Form Items

1. What city are the meeting minutes from: _____
2. What month/year did the meeting take place: _____
3. Which city council members were present: _____
4. What item on the agenda related to tobacco control: _____
5. What issues were raised during the discussion of the tobacco control item?

Issues Raised in Support [Individual(s) raising issue]	Issues Raised in Opposition [Individual(s) raising issue]

6. Were any other agenda items or discussions relevant to the work of the project? If so, please describe:

- Second, use the review form to collect information from each record.
 - Third, compile the information collected from the different records to get a comprehensive understanding of the event or topic you are interested in.
 - *Example:* You could list all the issues raised in support and all the issues raised in opposition.
 - *Example:* You could compare issues raised last year to issues raised this year.
 - *Example:* You could identify who consistently opposed and who consistently supported tobacco control initiatives and what reasons they gave.

- **Why would I use records as a process data collection activity instead of key informant interviews or focus groups?**

- Records can be accessed any time. You do not have to schedule the review based on someone else's schedule, or burden a busy policy-maker with your questions.
 - Reviewing records requires a systematic approach, but does not require as many data collection skills as interviewing.
 - Records are already available and many are part of the public record. As a result, they are often an inexpensive source of data.
 - Reviewing records is an unobtrusive approach. Sometimes people are less open with interviewers than they are in a meeting.
 - Records are a good source of information about the past. While human beings do not always remember past events accurately, records that were made at the time of the past events may be more dependable.

- **What are other issues I need to think about if I plan to use record reviews as a process data collection activity?**
 - Records usually are not prepared for the purpose of an evaluation, so they may not provide all the information the evaluation needs. In this case, combining a record review with some other form of data collection (such as key informant interviews) would provide a more complete understanding.
 - Not all records are public (tenant council meeting records, for example), so some negotiation may be needed to obtain them.
 - Records are not always maintained the way they are supposed to be. (For example, sometimes the person identified as the note-taker or secretary does not write up the minutes in a timely way.)
 - Records are sometimes difficult to locate, especially those created several years ago.
 - In some cases, confidentiality may be a concern when reviewing records that are not publicly available.
 - For data collected from records to be considered of high quality, the records must be reviewed systematically, ideally by using a record review form.

*For more Tips & Tools and other resources, go to our website:
<http://tobaccoeval.ucdavis.edu>*