

Making the Case for Public Health Investments

INSIGHTS FROM MESSAGE TESTING (FALL 2025)

Recommendations for Talking about Public Health, Based on the Evidence

When using this message, you're opening the door to a broader conversation about public health. Use these recommendations as you adapt this message to engage audiences and build a case for continued investment.

- **Emphasize collective action.** Support for public health is strong across demographic groups and partisan perspectives. When encouraging people to take action, phrases like "Together we have to..." increased optimism and the belief that Congress will listen to voters.
- **Connect to real threats.** Talk about cuts people already strongly oppose — especially to mental health services, food assistance, and efforts to make health care affordable.
- **Lead with clear, relatable examples.** Start with issues people instinctively see as government's responsibility — like clean air and water, disaster preparedness, and affordable care — before introducing the broader idea of "public health."
- **Keep it short and conversational.** When first engaging audiences, simple, concrete language outperforms longer explanations. Avoid "public health speak" and be conversational, simple, and direct.
- **Balance outrage and optimism.** Highlight what's at stake, then pivot to the need for collective action. Avoid language that takes outrage (e.g., "ridiculous" or "outrageous") too far into fatalism or hopelessness.

Insights into Public Opinion

- **Public health resonates broadly.** We tested 10 different messages arguing in favor of public health investments, and all saw strong support across demographic groups and political views.
- **Cuts to core health and safety-net programs are deeply unpopular.** Americans of all political affiliations oppose cuts to programs like SNAP and mental health services and want government to do more to ensure affordable, quality health care.
- **Public health competes for political attention.** Even traditional allies may be harder to engage given limited time and a wide range of pressing concerns — including the health of democracy, inflation, and the cost of health care.

Top-Performing Message

"It's ridiculous that America spends billions to treat sickness, rather than focusing on keeping people healthy and preparing communities for disasters. Keeping people healthy is a fraction of the cost of treating them when they're sick.

Congress needs to get serious about the health of Americans by protecting investments in public health."

What This Message Accomplishes

- Increased belief that public health is valuable.
- Increased people's interest in taking action to support public health funding.
- Seen as more memorable than other messages tested.
- Resonated with conservatives, independents, and people who view the MAHA movement favorably.

Alternative Message

"Public health stops problems before they start, saving lives and dollars.

Together, we have to call on our representatives in Congress and make clear that public health isn't partisan, it's a priority for all Americans."

This message is short and was the most effective at increasing optimism that members of Congress will listen to constituents and that collective action can influence policymakers. It was viewed as slightly less urgent and memorable than our recommended message.



The insights and recommendations provided are drawn from a survey and two rounds of message testing conducted between September and October 2025 with nearly 9,000 adults nationwide. The research, conducted by Burness using the Swayable platform, explored which arguments, messages, and phrases are most effective at increasing support for the federal government's investment in public health. This work was funded by the American Public Health Association (APHA) and Families USA. For more information about this project, please contact Susan Polan, PhD at susan.polan@apha.org and for questions about the research, please contact Nick Seaver at nseaver@burness.com.