Goal: Determining Effective Communication Strategies to Engage Local Public Officials to Increase Pipeline Safety in Their Communities

Project Description: Many of the major pipeline safety communication efforts, such as the Pipeline and Informed Planning Alliance (PIPA), Common Ground Alliance (CGA), American Petroleum Institute’s Recommended Practice 1162 (RP 1162), and others have identified “local public officials” as a key stakeholder group for increasing pipeline safety in areas where a pipeline failure could pose a significant risk. The catchall of “local public officials” includes those city and county government employees and elected officials who already have large mandated workloads, and tend to only respond to new initiatives in a reactive mode. For a stakeholder group that operates mainly in the reactive mode, safely operating pipelines are nearly completely out of sight and out of mind, which creates a significant barrier to getting this important stakeholder group to implement practices proactively to make pipelines even safer.

Previous communication efforts with “local public officials” have been geared toward raising awareness within this group about pipeline issues. While this is an important first step, there is a growing body of research that indicates that there is not necessarily a correlation between raising awareness and actual behavior change that will lead to the desired outcomes. In other words – the awareness of a city council member may be increased so they know about pipelines in their community and about the one call system, but that alone may not lead to them implementing policies that help prevent damage to pipelines. The goal of this project is to provide some verifiable research into methods that will effectively engage “local public officials” so that policies within their control are enhanced to increase pipeline safety in their communities.

The PIPA effort, which the Pipeline Safety Trust is a very active member of, has identified a “Seven Step Communication Model” (7-Step) to not only raise awareness but to focus on the desired behavior changes. This 7-step is based largely on Community-Based Social Marketing, which is a set of principles that helps design communication efforts focused on changing behaviors by clearly identifying successful messages, delivery strategies, barriers to success, incentives, etc. Social Marketing has been shown to be successful in creating education and outreach campaigns of remarkable effectiveness.

The purpose of this project is to actively pilot test the PIPA recommended 7-Step with “local public officials.” The grant will be used primarily to hire expertise in Community-Based Social Marketing, program development and evaluation, and statistical analysis to lead a small group of people through the development of a communications program to implement some of the PIPA recommended practices targeted at “local public officials.” The process will be guided by Community-Based Social Marketing principles, include diverse individuals, and result in a well tested and documented program that will be shared with others (PIPA, CGA, API 1162 workgroup, PHMSA, NAPSR, etc).

An initial PIPA Protocol Advisory Group will be assembled. This will be a small group (3-6) of diverse employment (pipeline industry, land use planner, City/County Association, government, non-profit) who represent those most likely to be asked to implement such a program. The purpose of the group is to act as potential implementers of the pilot program. They will provide input into each step of the protocol and act as reviewers and users of the research produced.

The project will involve comprehensive research in two different communities. The preliminary plan is to choose one community that possibly has heightened awareness of pipelines because of a pipeline-related emergency or a contentious pipeline siting issue. The second community will be one where pipelines are
still clearly out of site and out of mind. The desired outcomes, specific communities and audiences, and possible messages will be determined at the preliminary meeting of the PIPA Protocol Advisory Group (Steps 1-3 of the PIPA 7-Step).

The hired technical assistance/researchers will develop an accurate listing of the intended audience in the communities selected – likely a subset of all “local public officials.” A sample of these audience members will be invited to participate in qualitative interviews to gain insights into “local public officials’ initial perspectives on pipeline safety, communications and their role. Researchers will use these interviews to identify opportunities for obtaining local public officials’ buy-in to specific pipeline safety activities (damage prevention, land use policies, enhanced communication, etc).

Subsequently, the population will be surveyed using a mixed-mode administration (web and phone) to obtain a statistically valid representation of officials’ views, experiences and current practices. The research will determine the predominance of the various barriers and incentives to engaging in the desired safety behaviors and effective outreach techniques (Steps 4 & 5 of the PIPA 7-Step).

The PIPA Protocol Advisory Group will review the findings and develop potential program elements including the 4-Ps of social marketing: Product, Placement, Pricing and Promotion. In social marketing, products are any lasting tool or good that is produced (e.g. a web site or a laminated reference card). Placement refers to how the information and other promotional strategies will reach the intended audience. Pricing may refer to monetary rewards or penalties but also refers to anything that makes it easier to engage in the desired behavior (e.g. calling before digging) or makes it more “costly” to engage in the competing behavior (e.g. not calling).

Finally, members of the intended audience will be brought together for focus group discussions to review the proposed program elements and provide input and feedback. A proposed outreach plan will then be drafted and documented, with recommendations for the program’s design, performance measurement (Step 6 of the PIPA 7-Step) and ongoing program improvement (Step 7 of the PIPA 7-Step). The final product of this project will be distributed to PIPA, CGA, the API Public Awareness workgroup, PHMSA, FERC. It will be made easily available of the Pipeline Safety Trust’s website, and speakers will be available to describe the outcomes at appropriate conferences and workshops.

The Pipeline Safety Trust has been involved with many of the above mentioned multi-partner communication initiatives, and is also an active partner here in Washington state on similar land use initiatives around pipelines. The Trust will contract with Applied Research Northwest (ARN) to serve as the technical assistance to help guide, research, test, design and document this plan. ARN’s co-founder and president Dr. Pamela Jull will lead this effort. With specialties in research methods, social policy, program evaluation and statistical analysis, she adds her wealth of experience to all aspects of this project, including problem definition, project design, survey construction, focus group moderation, data analysis, and reporting. Dr. Jull has conducted, coordinated and directed program evaluations and survey research for Washington State schools, city and state government agencies, community non-profits, and health organizations. She has also supported community-based social marketing efforts with goal identification, focus group facilitation, survey research to identify barriers and enablers to behavior change and follow-up surveys to track campaign impacts. Dr. Jull is a Cornell University graduate and taught sociology and statistics at Western Washington University (WWU). She also directed the Office of Survey Research at WWU for five years, providing assessment research for the university and Washington State.