

# Executive Summary

*of the*

## Evaluation of the Healthy Michigan Campaign

*for*

### Clean Water Fund & The Ecology Center

*prepared by*

grassroots  solutions

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# I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## A. Introduction

In August 2006, the Clean Water Fund (CWF) and the Ecology Center in Michigan partnered to conduct a joint campaign to educate candidates for public office on the importance of environmental health issues, as well as to generally raise the public profile of environmental health issues. CWF identified 18 state legislative candidates in nine targeted state house districts as targets. The in-state partners worked closely with FieldWorks, a consulting firm hired to design and implement the organizing program. All partners worked with Grassroots Solutions, hired to design and conduct the evaluation, to examine the saliency of the three different messages to provide insight into how to best message future environmental health campaigns.

The three tested messages were:

- *Don't Wait for Washington!* This message asked the state legislative candidates to agree to take action at the state level, rather than wait for lawmakers in Washington to get rid of toxic chemicals and bring better jobs to Michigan.
- *Help Reverse the Toxic Trend!* This health message asked the candidates to support the Healthy Michigan plan and commit to get rid of toxic chemicals that increase cancer, birth defects, disabilities, and other health problems.
- *Win-Win!* This economic message asked the candidates, for the health of children and the economy, to work to create new jobs and get rid of toxic chemicals.

In addition to raising the overall profile of these environmental health messages, the overarching goal of what became known as the Healthy Michigan campaign was to move the individual candidates in these races by using a well-defined set of quantifiable field tactics to educate these candidates on the Healthy Michigan agenda, thus testing the three individual messages. Field tactics were to be consistently used with eighteen candidates across the nine districts; the framing of the Healthy Michigan message was to be the variable.

A secondary goal of the campaign was to mobilize activists and develop volunteer leadership, building the capacity of the Michigan conservation community to support further candidate education efforts on these issues in the future.

## B. Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation component of this campaign was designed to compare the effect of three different environmental health messages on the targeted state legislative candidates. The districts were divided up into three regions; each region received one of the targeted messages and was assigned an organizer.

One of the critical components of any evaluation is the determination of the baseline. In order to track the progress made during the course of the campaign and to measure the project's success, we monitored progress towards achieving the two fundamental goals by determining:

- Where the candidates stood on the issues prior to hearing the Healthy Michigan message, mid-campaign, and just prior to Election Day.
- Accessibility of the candidates at the same intervals.
- Number of tactics activists directed towards the candidates.

Grassroots Solutions interviewed the three organizers, as well as ten members of the project team from the partner organizations. These interviews were collated and reviewed for common themes.

The evaluation was enhanced by the willingness of each of the partnering organizations and the organizers to practice message discipline and collect and submit the required data.

### C. Outcomes

The following table summarizes the candidate and volunteer response to the three different messages.

	Message		
	<i>Don't Wait for Washington!</i>	<i>Help Reverse the Toxic Trend!</i>	<i>Win-Win!</i>
Number of targeted candidates	6	6	6
Candidates who committed their support	6	3	1
Candidates whose issue rating improved	4	2	3
Candidates whose issue rating remained the same	1	2	0
Candidates whose issue rating decreased	1	2	3
Active volunteers	15	22	7
Candidate meetings	12	6	7
Letters to the editor	6	8	8
Handwritten letters	141	119	130
Website-generated letters	79	48	59
Robocall responses *	50	94	53
Postcards returned	58	78	66
Percentage of those receiving robocalls and postcards that were CWA households (universe: 5000 per district)	44%	47%	81%
Total candidate contacts	328	339	308

\* Robocalls were made to members and registered voters in the targeted districts, asking them to record messages to their candidates. A CD of the recordings as well as a written document highlighting some of the responses were delivered to each candidate.

To summarize the quantitative findings:

- If committing to the Healthy Michigan agenda is the ultimate sign of support, then *Don't Wait for Washington!* was the most successful with six candidates signing on.
- *Don't Wait for Washington!* also garnered the most candidate movement towards the Healthy Michigan positions on the issues.
- *Help Reverse the Toxic Trend!* generated the most volunteer activity, but not by a large margin.
- There was a decrease in issue rating for six of the candidates. This may be due to inaccurate baseline ratings, rather than the candidates actually moving further away from the campaign message. For example, some of the candidates had answered environmental questionnaires in a manner that indicated that they were supportive of environmental issues in general, so the raters believed that they would be more supportive of environmental health issues specifically.

Qualitatively, the results were not as clear. The messages that the activists conveyed in their recorded responses to the robocall did not clearly reflect the individual messages of the campaign.

1. Campaign Impact on Legislators: The primary goal of the Healthy Michigan campaign was to get candidates to move on environmental health issues before being elected to the legislature. As a result of this campaign:

- CWF and the Ecology Center now have a stronger relationship with six members of the Michigan state legislature out of the nine elected from the targeted districts.
- Five members of the legislature are more closely aligned with the Healthy Michigan campaign message.
- Four members of the legislature (one incumbent and three new members) signed and can be held to the Healthy Michigan agenda.
- These elected officials may be more responsive to both CWF and the Ecology Center generally and to the Healthy Michigan legislative agenda specifically.

2. Don't Wait for Washington! Message – Genesee County: The *Don't Wait for Washington!* version of the campaign message was used in the three targeted house districts in Genesee County. The greatest improvement occurred with the candidates in this region:

- Four candidates' issue ratings improved
- One candidate's issue rating remained the same
- However, one candidate's issue rating actually decreased
- Additionally, all six of the candidates in this district committed to the Healthy Michigan agenda

Furthermore, the Healthy Michigan campaign created some buzz amongst the candidates in this region. Hammel (HD 48) and Hammon (HD 50), both sitting members of the county board of commissioners, told the organizer that they had discussed whether or not they should support Healthy Michigan concept. Hammel also discussed Healthy Michigan with two state senators demonstrating a “viral” quality to the campaign. Although he found the plan vague, he signed on nonetheless.

3. Help Reverse the Toxic Trend! Health Message – Ingham/Shiawassee Counties: The outcome for candidates targeted with the *Help Reverse the Toxic Trend!* health message was mixed:

- Two candidates’ issue ratings improved
- Two candidates’ issue ratings remained the same
- Two candidates’ issue ratings decreased
- Three of the six candidates targeted with *Help Reverse the Toxic Trend!* health message stated that they supported the campaign

Perhaps the biggest success story with an individual candidate took place in this region. John Knowles, from district 69, which was an open seat, made a radio ad stating that he supported the Healthy Michigan plan. Additionally, he left handwritten notes on the doors of Healthy Michigan activists. Although he lost, he developed a strong rapport with the organizer and likely will be a strong ally as a staff assistant to a state representative, bringing the Healthy Michigan message to his new role.

4. Win-Win! Jobs Message – Oakland/Western Wayne Counties: The outcomes for those candidates targeted with the *Win-Win!* jobs message was also somewhat mixed:

- Three candidates’ issue ratings improved
- Three candidates’ issue ratings decreased
- Only one of six candidates supported Healthy Michigan in this region

It seems that this message may have been the weakest of the three. The number of candidate contacts in this region was not notably different than the number of contacts in the other regions, indicating that the lack of movement on the issue was due to message rather than to lack of candidate contact.

5. Message Compared to Tactics: In an attempt to confirm that it was in fact the message that moved candidates, and not the amount of candidate contact, we compared four candidates who moved the same amount on their issue – all moved closer to the Healthy Michigan position by one. Two received the *Don’t Wait for Washington!* message and two received the *Help Reverse the Toxic Trend!* message, what appeared to be the two strongest of the three messages. While there was some similarity in the candidates themselves, for example, all were running for open seats, the total number of contacts the candidates received ranged from 77 to 165. This further supports the idea that message was the primary

variable that caused the candidates to move on the issue, not the amount of contact with the candidate.

When considering these outcomes, one must also consider other variables that may have been influential such as strength of the regional organizer, race competitiveness, and previous activity in the region. Another factor to be considered is that the subject of toxic chemicals as an environmental health issue is believed new to the area. Baseline ratings of the candidates were, to some degree, based on knowledge of their general positions on environmental issues, assuming that this would be an accurate indicator of their positions on Healthy Michigan. This was not always the case.

#### **D. Other Benefits Derived from the Campaign**

In addition to successfully moving half of the candidates on the issues and having just over half agree to support the Healthy Michigan concept, the partner organizations accrued many other benefits during the course of the campaign:

- The project added to the discourse of the campaigns around environmental issues. Organizers reported that Healthy Michigan was the only group really talking about environmental issues in these regions.
- The campaign built up the infrastructure of the partner organizations in several different ways, such as building lists and creating a culture of environmental activism in regions where it did not previously exist.
- Project staff felt that being involved with this project would enhance their organizations' future efforts by providing them with a perspective on this type of campaign that they would not have otherwise obtained. Relationships developed with the losing candidates will also likely enhance future advocacy and educational efforts as many of them have embarked on relevant post-campaign work. Additionally, Michigan legislative term limits may mean some of these targeted candidates will run again in the future.

#### **E. Lessons Learned**

Several lessons were learned during the course of the campaign. In future projects, any organization that is interested in implementing a similar campaign should carefully consider how the following four different factors impact the project:

- Timeline
- Timing
- Budget
- Available personnel

As other environmental groups consider this type of a campaign, they should consider the following questions:

- Will we have enough time to plan and execute a campaign in a way that will be meaningful and utilize our resources in a judicious manner?
- Is this the right time to take on a campaign of this magnitude or is the risk too great that our message will get lost in the shuffle?
- Are we willing to put forth the resources that will allow our messaging to make a meaningful impression on the candidates who we are targeting?

## **F. Recommendations**

Based on the direct outcomes of the campaign, the other benefits derived and the lessons learned, we make the following recommendations:

1. Conduct an Environmental Scan to Enhance Candidate Selection: Any group considering a similar campaign should conduct an environmental scan prior to planning a specific campaign. This will help determine what other interests could be competing for limited resources such as activists' attention, volunteers' time, media buys, and organizers. In order to develop a better understanding of these candidates and districts, talk to other organizations, as well as any of your activists that may know them better.
2. Lengthen the Organizing, Planning, and Execution Timelines: Beginning the campaign during the summer months, even if it is only four to six weeks longer, may offer opportunities to recruit at community events, as well as potentially reach candidates who do not campaign as aggressively. Also consider beginning work before the candidates start to plan their campaigns. This will increase the likelihood that the issue is a part of their platform and discussed in their campaign materials.
3. Target Open Races where the Winner of the General Election is Likely Known After the Primary: Targeting these races may be effective because not many other groups will be doing so. This means that the organization may have a better chance to develop relationships with the likely newly elected officials. Additionally, they will likely have a better understanding of the issue. Ideally, these new relationships will carry over after the candidate is sworn in at the statehouse.
4. Organizers and Field Staffing: Consider carefully whether the organizing component of the campaign should be completed by permanent staff members or by a field consulting firm. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, such as learning new tactics versus being able to staff up without hiring new, permanent employees. If field consultants are hired, be sure to develop and implement a system to capture detailed information on how the field plan was implemented, along with collection of lists and other data so that lessons can be learned from the process and the organization is building for the future.

5. Utilize Unique Tactics: The recorded responses to the robocalls that were given to each candidate on a CD was something new that attracted candidates' attention. One candidate said he knew five people personally who had recorded messages and another said they listened to the whole CD.
6. Have a Variety of Tactics Available: Testing tactics was not the primary purpose of this evaluation. The field operation worked very hard to ensure that tactics were implemented as evenly as possible. However, while evaluating the different messages, tactics were examined. It was not apparent that any specific tactic had any more of an impact than the others on the ultimate outcomes of the campaign. But different tactics often worked better in some regions than in others. For example, college students were an excellent source of volunteers in the districts where there were universities. Meet-ups worked in some districts, but not in others. One of the regions had a higher rate of returned postcards and recorded responses to the robocalls than the others. Furthermore, different candidates respond to different tactics. Some candidates simply will not agree to support a specific campaign, but that does not mean that they will not move closer to the organization's stance on the issue. In a program that is not also an evaluation, it is important to maintain flexibility when implementing the tactics.
7. Budgets: Often budgets feel like a blessing and a curse, but either way they are the financial reality, and, along with the campaign plan, serve as the project's road map. Understanding and having time to project what different portions of the project will cost and what are realistic efforts and tactics within the budget can assist in making strategic decisions. Understanding the financial limitations or opportunities early on in your efforts will refine those decisions.
8. Create a Budget and a Campaign Plan that are Compatible: If paid media are included in the list of desired tactics, the budget must allow for that cash outlay. Conversely, if there is only a limited budget available, the campaign plan should not rely on paid media. One way to maximize a budget that includes paid media is to choose districts in smaller, less expensive media markets. Targets in large media markets will either take a disproportionate amount of your media budget or will need to be covered by grassroots and earned media efforts. For example, this campaign cost \$118,356. Although the campaign plan called for paid media in each region, the budget for the project was not adequate for buys in one of the regions. A higher budget would have allowed additional paid media such as radio and/or TV ads, which may have been helpful in spreading the message to a broader audience.
9. Polling and Research: Polling and research could be used to refine the messages, possibly making them more distinct or more relevant to the region that is being targeted. By testing the message up front, future campaigns will be in a better position to use a message or messages that best resonate with the targeted regions. This could possibly help hold down costs, as fewer numbers of ads and other materials need to be generated.

10. Types of Messages: This project used positive messaging around the issues. Future campaigns may wish to consider negative messaging as an option for future research or actions. Negative messages are generally thought to be more effective than positive messages. Because we did not test a negative message around environmental health, we do not know if “going negative” would have been any more or less effective than staying positive. One way to test this would be to vet a negative message such as “Michigan’s children have a greater number of birth defects because of the industries in our state that use toxic chemicals” through polling and/or focus groups.

11. Web-Generated Letters: One hundred and ninety-one letters were generated on the Healthy Michigan website. Some supporters responded to multiple emails asking for letters to the candidates. Eighteen people used the Healthy Michigan website to generate multiple letters to their candidates. Unfortunately, the sample letter did not change over time. Users of this tool seemed reluctant to edit the sample letters provided. This means that the candidate received the same letter, not just multiple times, but multiple times from the same voters. Another alternative would be to eliminate those who had responded to previous emails on the next email sent soliciting web-based letters.

## **G. Conclusion**

Quantitatively, it seems that the “*Don’t Wait for Washington*” message was the most successful, as all six of the candidates in this region supported the Healthy Michigan concept and four moved closer to the Healthy Michigan stance on this environmental health issue. This message yielded a substantially greater number of website-generated letters than the other two. But qualitatively, the outcome seems somewhat different. None of the 50 people who recorded a response to the robocall echoed the “*Don’t Wait for Washington!*” message in their response. The organizer in this region felt that the activists picked up more on the jobs portion of this message than the Washington portion of the message.

However, the actual jobs message, “*Win-Win!*” was, quantitatively, the least successful of the messages, with only one candidate committing support. Furthermore, half of the candidates’ issue ratings actually decreased. Although these decreases, as well as the ones for the other messages, are likely due to inaccuracies in the initial baseline issue ratings, rather than a result of the campaign, we do know that these candidates did not move closer to the Healthy Michigan stance. But qualitatively, more than two-thirds of the respondents to the robocalls specifically mentioned jobs in their recordings, rather than simply some version of “Support the Healthy Michigan Plan.”

*Help Reverse the Toxic Trend!* generated the most message-driven tactics – 94 robocall responses and 78 postcards returned. Also, what seems to have been the most successful district was in this region, where both of the candidates had the highest final access rating possible. But the quantitative results with the candidates were the most mixed, half of the candidates committed support and they were evenly split between improving, remaining the same, and decreasing on issue ratings.

These uneven results among the three messages make it difficult to conclude that any of the messages was clearly stronger than the others. A larger media buy may have allowed one of the messages to break through more clearly, as paid media is a tool that can convey a concise, consistent message to candidates, volunteers, and membership. Although there was not an overwhelming consensus around the need for a larger budget, there certainly was recognition that a higher budget, particularly for the media efforts, would have been helpful for this project. For all of these reasons, we strongly believe that any group interested in implementing and testing a similar message campaign increase the budget to accommodate a much bigger media buy. In order to maximize those dollars, a portion of the increased budget should be directed towards polling and focus groups to assist with the selection of a message that may be most effective in the targeted districts.

As none of the messages clearly distinguished themselves as the most effective, additional testing may be necessary in order to draw more solid conclusions regarding the effectiveness of these environmental health messages. We recommend that such further testing include more refined messages in a longer project timeline with additional research and more substantial media buys. This evaluation simply provides a starting point for research on environmental health messages that are compelling to both candidates and activists. The next test of the Healthy Michigan campaign will be whether or not the candidates who were elected and committed to support the Healthy Michigan agenda will be supportive of the Healthy Michigan agenda during the legislative session.

Unfortunately, the identification of an unmistakably more effective environmental health message was not one of the clear outcomes of this project. However, the organizational partners felt that the number of other benefits derived and lessons learned made the Healthy Michigan campaign a valuable learning experience for these in-state groups.