COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AT POVERTY SOLUTIONS

By Kristen Kerecman

Poverty Solutions is committed to public engagement and the University of Michigan’s mission to serve society.

We do this by partnering across campus with faculty, institutes, and centers, and by connecting with community organizations, media, policymakers, and interested groups and individuals outside the university. Internally, we leverage a network of departments and communication channels that help connect us to our target audiences.

BACKGROUND

By providing resources for faculty and staff to connect and engage with a broad scope of public-facing activities — such as community outreach, policy and advocacy, and media interactions — Poverty Solutions supports and amplifies the expertise across the university to help shape the policies and programs that can bring about positive change. We also recognize that strategic communication is critical to actively and broadly disseminating Poverty Solutions’ action-oriented work to multiple audiences and stakeholder groups in order to increase its positive effects on practice and policy related to poverty prevention and alleviation.

OUR APPROACH

We endeavor to build relationships across the University of Michigan and with external partners, including editors, reporters, policymakers, and staff, to apply our work in a way that is responsive to community needs and interests. Strategies include efforts to:

- Develop a network of faculty experts from across the university, including perspectives on poverty from business, education, public policy, engineering, social work, and more.
- Identify and link faculty, students, and community partners to a spectrum of public engagement opportunities, such as media interactions, community outreach, and policymaker engagement.

- Meet faculty and partners where they are. Some of our experts are more interested in community engagement, some are inclined to interact with media, and others are well positioned to seek out lawmakers. We want to amplify these efforts while offering complementary options to expand engagement.
- Identify opportunities for experts and partners to serve on advisory boards, connect with policymakers through key events, and deliver expert testimony.
- Identify opportunities for faculty and partners to serve as spokespeople in the media through news releases, opinion editorials, expert advisories, and public events.

ADMINISTRATION

Poverty Solutions works closely with university partners to support and amplify our efforts, including the Vice President for Communications, VP of Government Relations, and fundraising and development, as well as with a network of communication leads across the university’s schools, colleges, and units.

While we recognize that each institution’s communications capacity and structure varies, having an embedded presence and connection to these university structures helps to guide the initiative’s public engagement strategy with external stakeholders, such as policymakers and media. It also enables the development of products necessary for those connections such as policy briefs and working papers, as well as media dissemination, data maps, fact sheets, and other data visualizations. These connections also provide opportunities for poverty-related research and work to become part of broader university messaging.

Some funding comes from the central office of the VP for Communications to support communications activities for Poverty Solutions and other key university-wide initiatives. Poverty Solutions also leverages key communications departments, such as public relations and social media, to amplify our efforts.
Key internal partners include:

- **Michigan News**: The university’s public relations department within the VP for Communications office helps to coordinate news releases, target key reporters, and develop media strategy.

- **Government Relations**: Helps to shape and identify connections to key policymakers and opportunities to engage through testimony or special events.

- **Marketing**: The university-wide marketing department, Michigan Creative partners to design and develop promotional materials such as the Poverty Solutions annual impact report and event materials.

- **Social media**: The university’s central social media team is integrated into all public announcements and provides guidance and assistance for social media sharing.

- **Multi-department convening**: Our efforts include a quarterly convening of key university-wide communications professionals, including representatives from Michigan’s PR office, the university president’s speechwriter, and others to discuss strategy and opportunities.
CASE STUDIES

Providing Accessible Data: Michigan Poverty and Well-being Map

Any one poverty statistic shows only a piece of the puzzle. And while several efforts exist to conduct important deep dives into several issue areas including education, health, and others, policymakers and communities in Michigan did not have access to an easy way to digest a range of indicators on poverty.

In 2017, Poverty Solutions published its first annual Poverty and Well-being map, an interactive tool designed to streamline an overwhelming amount of data, which will make it easier to understand what’s happening in counties across Michigan.

The county-by-county map of poverty and well-being allows residents to see how core metrics of well-being in their communities compare to others across the state.

The strategy was to share directly with media, policymakers, and communities, including specific statistics relevant to each region. Poverty Solutions and U-M’s public relations service issued a press release with advance notice to the Associated Press, and 18 localized media advisories to regional outlets across the state, highlighting key findings from their coverage area.

The dissemination strategy resulted in broad coverage and several in-depth stories from local papers who used the map to dive deeper into poverty challenges in their region. The map was viewed more than 35,000 times in the months following its release, and received broad coverage and several in-depth stories from local newspapers, who used it to dive deeper into poverty challenges in their region (e.g., Saginaw Channel 5, Traverse City Record Eagle). It was also featured in major regionals nationwide.

We continue to receive requests from media, nonprofit agencies, and others interested in exploring and using the data. The data map was also the catalyst for the creation of a regional poverty committee for one county-wide effort in western Michigan.

Connecting with Media and Policymakers on Student Homelessness

Michigan has one of the largest populations of homeless students in the United States. In school year 2015–16, Michigan ranked 6th among states with the most homeless students.

Studies show that children need stability to thrive, but for more than 36,000 children in Michigan’s elementary, middle, and high schools who face homelessness and housing insecurity, stability is often elusive.

After an in-depth data and policy analysis, Poverty Solutions issued an interactive map tool and policy brief detailing the challenges, current data, and recommendations for improvement.
The report was shared directly with state legislative staff, followed by a public release to media and targeted regional outreach throughout the state. The brief was also shared with Detroit Public School administrators who used the evidence to change policies and practices.

In the months since the map’s release, the analyses of Michigan’s homeless student graduation and dropout rates have proven to be important tools for advocates and policymakers at state and federal levels. The analyses identified a major undercount of homeless students in Detroit, and led the Detroit Public Schools Community District to make major changes in the way it collects and reports these data to the federal government.

The map was also viewed more than 25,000 times and generated more than 20 articles and television reports across Michigan, including Traverse City 9&10, Interlochen Public Radio, Cadillac News, Yahoo Sports, and more.

“The data that was shared in the U-M Poverty Solutions policy briefs on Michigan schools’ homeless counts and the graduation rates of homeless students really provided new awareness and helped move forward the decision by DPSCD [Detroit Public Schools District] administration to strengthen their McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program by providing additional support for these vulnerable children and youth; identifying a trained point of contact for homeless students in every DPS school; adding a transportation coordinator to support the work of the Homeless and Foster Youth Liaison in maintaining those students in their schools of origin to ensure their educational stability. This added support will impact the program’s success and the students’ success immensely.”

Pam Kies-Low, Michigan Department of Education State Coordinator for Homeless Education

Many families in Detroit were essentially losing their homes to tax foreclosure for taxes they could have been exempt from paying. Through a Poverty Solutions-funded community-academic partnership project, U-M assistant professor Roshanak Mehdipanah and PhD candidate Alexa Eisenberg partnered with the United Community Housing Coalition, a nonprofit providing housing assistance programs in Detroit, to explore ways low-income Detroit residents can benefit from an existing law that could help keep more people in their homes.

Out of the 105 residents they surveyed, 82 percent reported severe housing cost burden, with more than half their income going toward housing. Moreover, 72 percent indicated they had to decide between paying for housing or paying for other necessities, like food or medical care. They also found that a lack of awareness about the tax exemption program was one of the biggest hurdles.

To raise awareness, the project leads worked with Poverty Solutions to create an informational video campaign targeted toward Detroit residents. The launch plan included a media advisory and paid social media campaign. It was picked up by Detroit television news channels and reached over 20,000 Detroiters via Facebook. After this effort, combined with outreach from community groups to disseminate information about the poverty tax exemption, the Detroit Assessor reported a significant increase in tax exemption applications. Poverty Solutions team members are now working with the City of Detroit to develop new ways to successfully review a much larger pool of applications.

Targeting a Detroit Audience to Raise Awareness about Resources Available to Low-income Homeowners

Since 2010, more than a quarter of all Detroit homes have been foreclosed and auctioned off. Studies have shown that the impact of foreclosure extends well beyond the loss of tax revenues: it disrupts neighborhoods, destabilizes housing markets, and displaces families, including homeowners with low and fixed incomes and renters whose landlords failed to pay the taxes.